

THE HARRINGTONS HIGHCROFT FARM

J. S. FLETCHER



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HIGHCROFT FARM



"THEY MADE A PICTURESQUE PAIR, THESE TWO."

(p 112.)

THE HARRINGTONS
OF
HIGHCROFT FARM

BY

J. S. FLETCHER

Author of

"WHEN CHARLES THE FIRST WAS KING," ETC.

EIGHT DRAWINGS BY

J. AYTON SYMINGTON



—
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HIGHCROFT FARM.

CHAPTER I.

UNCLE BENJAMIN.

A JUNE morning; a long, narrow, upland field, wherein the first green of the wheat showed itself in straight, monotonous lines; in the middle of the field myself, plodding steadily along, hoe in hand, clearing the wheat of weeds, which too often had a beauty not given to the smooth green blades that rose vigorously from the red earth at the bidding of the masterful sun.

I can look back across the long gap of intervening years to that particular morning, and see the growing wheat and the dew that still lingered on the shady sides of the rapidly swelling blades, and the red Mother Earth herself—good wife to the sun, and faithful sister to the snows and rains—and the hedge-rows, gay with June roses, and the dwarf oaks standing like sentinels above them. The Ten-Acre lay on the topmost part of the highest ground in the parish; each time that I gained its western extremity, after hoeing my way steadily from the eastern, I came to a fence over which I could look down into a valley lying two hundred feet below me. But, near as it was, this valley was no part of my country. In the opposite direction, at a mile's distance from the Ten-Acre, the square tower of a village church rose above a ring of elm and ash. Here and

there, where there was a break in that ring, the high gable of a barn or a granary showed itself; here and there the sun smote warmly on the red-tiled roof of a farmhouse or on the gilded vane of a dovecote. All that meant the village—the centre of my small world.

It was matter of common repute that one could obtain an extensive prospect from the Ten-Acre. That depended upon the clearness of the atmosphere. On a day of proper conditions, one could see, looking in different directions, the flash of sunlight on the Humber, the towers of York Minster, and the Abbey Church of Selby, the long, low undulations of the Wolds, and the bolder outline of the Pennine Range. But such days were rare.

This was not one of them. As is often the case in June, there had been a heavy dew in the early morning—my thick boots were soaked with it, for there is nothing whereto the dew so clings as it does to growing wheat—and it had been succeeded by a hot sun. And so the horizon was wrapped in steamy clouds which took prismatic colours as they strayed about the edges of the deep woods.

It was very quiet there in the Ten-Acre. Now and then, when I paused—perhaps from weariness, perhaps from unconscious imitation of older labourers, who are given to resting ten minutes after working for five—when I paused, I say, and looked about me I saw nothing of human life anywhere. I knew where it was to be found by the occasional appearance of a red-tiled roof here and there in the landscape, and by the spirals of smoke which rose from behind a covert or a plantation. But there was no one but myself working in that particular part of the parish just then, and since entering the Ten-Acre at seven o'clock in

the morning I had not seen a human face or heard a human voice.

Not that this little patch of God's earth was a solitude of silence. There was a thick covert, or spinney, at one corner of the Ten-Acre, and in it the birds were singing as if they could never exhaust their store of melody. High above me, mere fluttering specks in the blue, the skylarks essayed the sunward path, not silently, but with the rapturous song of a great desire. And as I neared the great hedgerows at either end of the field I heard, long before I could smell the may-blossom that still lingered in them, and the delicate wild roses which had only just come, and were still as pink as an infant's palm, the humming and buzzing of the myriad insects which haunted the undergrowth or wove fantastic dances in the sunlight. Now and then, too, I caught the faint bleating of sheep from some field in the valley, and at times the barking of dogs far off across the land.

Men and women who work in solitude in the fields are quick to make a companion of something, even of an inanimate—or so-called inanimate—object. A particular tree, a particular hawthorn bush in a hedge-row, an old gate, a rock or stone jutting out of the wayside—these things, to the lonely, may become more than close friends. I had many such friends in various parts of the parish, and could talk to them much more freely than to men or women. They had the gift of sympathy, and at least could say nothing cruel or unkind. And they spoke eloquently enough to me, as all things of Nature did. Such human beings as I knew thought me mad if they found me staring abstractedly at a common flower, or listening by the hour together—looking vacant enough, no

doubt—to a thrush in the holly-hedge. I could sit underneath a favourite tree, or on some grey rock, or by some well for a whole day, and feel that the tree, and the rock, and the well understood—besides, they carried their parts through the world with such sublime patience. The tree bore the buffeting of all the winds; the rock was always firm, immovable; the well was ever cheerful—if ill-fortune disturbed or muddied it, how quickly its face cleared again!

I had a good friend in close proximity to the Ten-Acre. Two fields' space away, at the far edge of the high ground which overtopped the valley, stood the village mill, a high, cone-shaped structure, for all the world like a sugar-loaf, surmounted by a quaint wooden weathercock, and furnished with four great sails. Never was there such an incentive to labour as that mill. The sails went round as if they could never tire; to fix your eyes steadily on one of them was to learn all the secrets of life. For now it was pointing straight to heaven, and now it was half-way between heaven and earth, and now it was gazing on earth itself, and now half-way again between earth and heaven, and now once more looking on the high sun and the eternal blue. And its rhythmic motion voiced itself into two words: "Go on—go on—go on—go on!"

He is the best friend who spurs his friend to ceaseless endeavour. That was why the mill was a good friend to me, hoeing wheat on a hot June morning in the Ten-Acre. It was no easy thing for a lad of fifteen to hoe wheat from seven to twelve, and again from one till five in weather like that. I had got rid of my coat before eight o'clock, and of my waistcoat before ten—now I was working in nothing



"NEVER WAS THERE SUCH AN INCENTIVE TO LABOUR
AS THAT MILL."

(p. 4.)

but shirt and trousers, and the sweat was running off me in rivulets. But I was used to that, and to a hot sun, and to days spent out in a heavy rain, and deep snow, and to all the vagaries of the weather, and minded nothing of any. Yet of all forms of farm labour, I cared least for hoeing of wheat or turnips. There was a certain amount of interest in shepherd-ing, and a vast amount of skill in ploughing, but hoeing was a veritable monotony. Up the field in a straight line, down the field in another straight line, only a foot or so away. It needed several hours' work before you had appreciably moved away from the point where you had started. It used to make me think of a beetle which I had once seen crawling up and down the bars of a gridiron.

All the same, there was so much to be done, and the only way to do it was to follow the advice of the creaking sails of the old mill. Go on, go on, go on! Nothing but going on would do the task that must be accomplished ere evening fell.

I heard the clock in the village church strike eleven as I came to that end of the Ten-Acre which overlooked the valley. There, in a quiet nook beneath the sheltering hedgerow, lay my coat, my waistcoat, and my dinner basket. A vision of what lay hidden within the basket crossed my mind as I caught sight of it. There was a pasty of meat and another of fruit, and a hunch of bread and cheese, together with a bottle of small ale and another of cold tea—a capital assuager of thirst if you keep the milk out of it and sweeten it but slightly. Just then I thought little of the food—a hot June sun is no appetiser—but I suddenly discovered that I was thirsty. And for the first time since I had entered

the field at seven o'clock I sat down at the foot of the hedgerow and got out the bottle of cold tea and drank. That was when I fell away from strict duty. If I set out to do a thing there was a certain stubborn doggedness in me that made me do it—I had meant to go on hoeing until noon without a break. But as I was putting the bottle back into the basket I caught sight of a book which I had slipped in with the food just before leaving my grandmother's farmhouse. It was one of a small collection of books that had once belonged to my father—an old, worm-eaten, leather-bound treatise on some dry-as-dust subject which had been printed in London in Charles the Second's time. I do not suppose I understood very much of it, but anything printed had always had a sacred value to me, and I was nearly as fond of books as of Nature.

I had no other thought than just to peep into this old, musty duodecimo. I had never opened it before, so it was a new world. Perhaps its first page was very dry and sleep provoking, perhaps four hours of continuous labour in the hot sun had made me drowsy—at any rate, I fell asleep. And in those days I could sleep soundly.

Stretched out there on the bank under the hedge-row I heard nothing, knew nothing, until a sudden sharp, stinging pain on the fleshy part of my bare arm brought me to my feet and to consciousness. I rubbed my eyes, blinking in the sunlight. And as I did so I was aware of laughter—the malicious, spiteful laughter of children—and of a man's voice, foolishly jeering.

"There, I thought that would touch my young gentleman up!"

The sleep was out of my eyes by that time. I looked round me. It was, of course, Uncle Benjamin Harrington. He had driven his smart dog-cart along the soft earth of the headland, and finding me asleep under the hedge had awakened me with a flip of his knotted whip-lash. He looked at me now with the sneer of the ignorant bully that he was.

I looked back at him. I daresay that a third person—of any power of observation—had he been present at this and similar interviews between myself and Uncle Benjamin, would have said that here were two people who hated each other with a very cordial hatred, and who were perpetually on their guard against each other. Nor would he have been wrong.

I gave Uncle Benjamin a good long stare, putting into my eyes, I daresay, all the hatred and contempt I felt for him. Then I looked slowly at his companions. By his side sat his wife, whose mean, secretive character had written itself too plainly on her face; on the back seat of the dog-cart sat his daughter, my cousin Bertha, a girl of my own age; between me and the dog-cart, hands in pockets and laughing, as they all were, stood his son, my cousin Thomas, a boy of twelve. And I saw why he had got out of the trap—it was to secure my book, which Uncle Benjamin was now turning over.

I looked down at my bare arm. Where the knot at the end of the whip-lash had caught it there was a dull red mark which was fast deepening in colour. I looked from it to the woman. She flushed a little and stirred uneasily in her seat.

Even then I had a certain command over a temper that had been sorely tried. Without a word I picked up my hoe and made to pass the front of the mare.

With a jerk of his reins Uncle Benjamin forced the beast across the path.

"Here, you, sir!" he said. "What are you going to do?"

"Going on with my work," I replied, in a steadier voice than his.

"And I should think you were!" he sneered. "Don't you think it's a nice thing, now, that I came here, expecting to find you at work, as you ought to be, and instead of that, find you asleep in the hedge-bottom with a book at your side, you idle young dog? Eh?"

I leaned my hands on the top of the hoe, and resting my chin on my hands stared at him in silence for a moment. Then I smiled.

"If you'll see what I've done," I said slowly, "as you easily can by turning your head, you'll know that I've finished more than a morning's work already—a good deal more than any man you've got on the farm would have done. I do my work honestly—I don't hoe for five minutes and idle for ten. There's some difference between me and your other men."

"Oh, there's some difference between them and you, is there?" he sneered uglily. "And what difference may there be, Master Cockril?"

"More than one," said I. "But one in particular."

"Oh, one in particular, is there?" he retorted. "Dear-y me! And you can give it a fine name, no doubt."

"It doesn't need one," I answered. "It's merely that you pay them and you don't pay me. That's perhaps why I'm more conscientious than they are. It helps me to think that I'm working more for work's sake than for you."

That fetched the blood into his face and the passion to his lips.

"You infernal young scoundrel!" he burst out. "Pay you!—you're paid only too well! Who finds you house-room? Who finds you your meat? Who finds you in clothes? Who——"

I suddenly burst into laughter. I think it cannot have been pleasant laughter to hear, for the woman stirred restlessly in her seat again, and the two children became curiously grave. And laughing, I threw down the hoe and picked up my old jacket—a thing which had been patched up so often that it was now scarcely possible to say which was the original cloth. I held it up. My cousin Thomas's suit of fine blue serge suddenly assumed a shining splendour.

"Clothes?" I said. "There's a better coat than that on the scarecrow in Spinks's field yonder. A beggar wouldn't wear that. But it's good enough to work in."

"And what are you but a beggar?" he demanded fiercely. "Haven't I had to keep you for years. Did your father ever do anything for you—a poor, shiftless——"

"He was my father," I said very steadily, "and my mother was your sister."

"And as poor a couple of mortals as ever lived!" he said, with the same ugly sneer. "Your father never did anything but moon over his books, and your mother was as helpless as a doll. They were naught but a couple of children—couldn't pay their way——"

"Can you?" I said, staring him straight in the face and smiling a little.

Those two words produced a strange effect. Uncle Benjamin's face, which had been red with

anger, suddenly paled. He had been leaning forward in the trap ; he pulled himself erect with a quick jerk, and at the same time his wife turned towards him with a look in which more than one emotion was blended.

I was young and cruel. I had hit him in a tender spot, and before he had time to retort I hit him again —harder—in the same place.

"How did you get the money to pay Brewster for the posts and rails ?" I asked, smiling at him.

If my first question had produced a storm, the second, by comparison, produced a cyclone. For a moment Uncle Benjamin gazed at me with eyes in which passion was mingled with incredulousness and fear—he looked as if he could not believe his ears. Then with an inarticulate growl he suddenly threw the reins into his wife's lap, and snatching the whip from its socket made as if he would leap out of the trap—to fall upon me. His wife seized his arm.

"Don't, Benjamin !" I heard her say. "Don't you see, the lad——"

"Let go !" he panted. "Let——"

But a sudden diversion interrupted this scene. My cousin Thomas, a boy of singularly mischievous and malicious ingenuity, had for the last moment or two been hovering in my rear. There was a briar bush in the hedgerow close behind me, and he had stealthily broken off a shoot which was well furnished with sharp thorns, and now, as I stood with hands clasped behind my back, facing his father, he stole up behind me and drew it, saw-fashion, across my knuckles. I felt the blood squirt, warm and sticky, simultaneously with the fire-like bite of the thorns.

I was quick on my feet in those days, and I swung round ere the lad could leap away, and smacked him so hard across his face that he reeled round like a top and fell head over heels into the briar bush. And from its depths he set up a howl that almost did justice to the sufferings which he doubtless experienced. Uncle Benjamin's wife was one of those women who, cold to everything and to everybody outside their own interests and their own family, are capable of cherishing a fatuous affection for their own flesh and blood. As the cries of her pet lamb fell upon her ears she uttered an exclamation which almost rose into a shriek.

"You wicked, good-for-nothing boy!" she cried. "To strike a child not half your own size! Why, there's blood on his face!"

"My blood," I said quietly, holding up my lacerated hand. "My blood."

"You deserve a good sound thrashing!" she went on. "You great, ruffianly coward—a good sound thrashing—that's what you want."

"And he shall have it," said Uncle Benjamin, who was almost choking with rage. "Hold those reins, mother, and give me that ash-plant, you, Bertha, and I'll thrash him till I can't stand over him. I'll show him who's master here."

But I was much too subtle for Uncle Benjamin. I had kept an eye upon him from the moment wherein I smacked Master Thomas across his shining, pastry-fed face. He was a big, heavy man, and slow in his movements; hard work on the land had made me active and agile. Before Uncle Benjamin had possessed himself of the ash-plant which Bertha obligingly drew from under the back seat I had dodged

round the dog-cart and snatched the whip from its socket.

Now I had them at my mercy! I shall never forget the wild feeling of delight with which I sprang back from the trap and swung the long curling lash into the air. I think I let out a yell or scream of defiance—certain it is that Uncle Benjamin swore and threatened, that his wife shrieked, that Bertha howled, that Thomas, escaped from the briar bush, forgot his pain and stood open-mouthed.

"Put that whip down, you young scoundrel!" stormed Uncle Benjamin.

I laughed, and lifted the whip still higher, brandishing it a little. And then—

Swish it fell across the mare's flanks—swish it fell across the mare's shoulders—swish again about the mare's legs!

The mare had blood in her—Uncle Benjamin always drove good cattle—and the least touch of a whip was as repellent to her as the sting of a hornet. She gave one startled snort of indignation and astonishment, rose up on her hind legs, fought madly with her feet, and then with one wild plunge set off down the Ten-Acre in the maddest gallop I ever saw, with Uncle Benjamin tearing at the reins, the women clinging to the trap and the trap rocking and swaying like a ship in a storm.

There was a low hedge at the foot of the Ten-Acre—they went through it as if it had been paper, and plunged into the Twenty-Acre on the other side. I clambered up a tree in the hedgerow to watch them. The mare took them twice round the Twenty-Acre before she tried the low hedge again, and in trying it the second time she fell. From the way in which

all three occupants of the trap were soon on their feet and bustling about it and the mare, I assured myself that they were not injured. And presently Uncle Benjamin led mare and trap into the lane.

I descended to earth. My cousin Thomas, horror-stricken and trembling, shrank away from me as I advanced upon him. He gazed at me as if he were fascinated.

"Well, you miserable brat!" I said, cracking the whip. "Have you had enough punishment for your cowardly trick, or do you want some more? No more?—then off you run, and there's something to speed you."

I gave him a smart cut round his legs and sent him off howling. In a few minutes Uncle Benjamin and his family were out of sight.

The village clock struck twelve. It was dinner-time. I sat down to my pasties and my small ale. But alas! I had no book to read. Uncle Benjamin had carried it away in that mad gallop.

CHAPTER II.

LOOKING BACK.

HAVING no book to read, I turned to the pieces of newspaper in which my pasties had been wrapped, but finding them to be mere scraps of the *Sicaster Signal*, with nothing more entertaining than advertisements upon them, I quickly threw them aside, and found occupation in my own thoughts. That was an occupation to which I had turned at a very early period of my existence. I had been left so much to myself, had been so much obliged, by force of circumstance, to make myself my own company, that it was a second nature in me to look inward instead of outward whenever I was alone, which I generally was for the greater part of the day.

Looking back, it now seems to me a sad thing that for a boy of fifteen the encounter with Uncle Benjamin should have left me cold and emotionless. Beyond a feeling of supreme delight experienced on seeing the mare set off at racing speed, I was unmoved. There was not an extra heart-throb in me. I might have been a spectator at a play. If anything, I was slightly bored. I had gone through so many scenes with Uncle Benjamin. I should have enjoyed them more, felt them more if he had been more of a man. But for two years I had known, with a precocious child's sure knowledge, that Uncle Benjamin, like all hectoring bullies, was an arrant coward at heart. He could cringe and fawn ; he was

as a sucking dove to folk whom he regarded as his superiors in the social scale, and his voice was bland and suave if his landlord deigned to converse with him at the rent dinner. And he was afraid of his wife. More than all—so far as I was concerned—he was afraid of me. He knew very well that I saw through him, and had a profound contempt for him. It sometimes chanced that he and I were left together for an hour or two—it might be when I helped him with his accounts or wrote letters for him, or if we went to measure a field (for he made me useful in as many ways as he could), or if we journeyed to a distant fair or market. On all these occasions, although we preserved an outward appearance of civility, we were each on guard. We were like wrestlers, circling round each other with wary eyes, neither of us anxious to attack, but each resolute upon defence. I laughed aloud as I sat in the hedge-bottom, eating my dinner and thinking these things over.

"We're a queer lot!" I said to myself. "A queer lot, indeed!"

And in good truth a queer lot we were. At that time I had read very little in fiction, though it was merely for lack of opportunity; but I thought as I sat there that the Harrington family surely presented chances to any novelist who cared to avail himself of them. And I began to think them over, not unnaturally using myself as a centre-point round which other people and things might centre.

What a marvellously interesting thing the life of a man is to the man himself, if he possesses a temperament which enables him to get clean outside himself, and to regard that life from a cold, emotionless,

dispassionate standpoint! It is as if one had two lives: one, freed from the weaknesses and frailties and sad shortcomings of human nature, perpetually watching, enticing, being amused by and pitying the other, all too prone to give way to them. In the end, perhaps, this we shall find to be the truth—that there is in each of us the perfect and the imperfect, the perfect weighed down by the imperfect, and longing, yet with a great patience, to be free of it. And yet I cannot think that there is war between these two of the nature of the strife between flesh and soul of which St. Paul speaks; to me this perfect state is that of sublime indifference, of cold unemotion. It is the cold, sunlit silence of the Arctic summer, the hush of the topmost peak of some giant amongst mountains; in other words, it is voiceless, intangible endurance, the over-allness of a strong spirit that refuses to see the small things within the human limit, and looks with steady eyes to far-off, limitless things which are ever, however slowly, drawing nearer. Only one thing makes a man strong in this philosophy of indifference to those material things of life by which most human beings set such store—the discipline of pain. If there was a vast contempt in me at that age for those trivialities of which the people about me thought so much, it was because I had gone through more pain, physical as well as mental, than the majority of human beings ever experience in a lifetime. It had burnt something out of me that has never come back—from childhood I have never been able to realise that life is anything but a dream, an unreality, a wearisome waiting for the lifting of that veil which is not, after all, so thick but that we can see through it dimly. Perhaps because of long

hours, days, nights, months, extending into years, spent in agonising physical pain, perhaps because of mental perplexities that accompanied it, I had come to a certain unchildlike stoicism of demeanour and of habit of thought. You can beat a man until there comes a stage when, though he is not unconscious, he has no more feeling left. That is how I felt at this time. It seemed to me that I stood, indifferent to almost everything about me, always looking, looking, looking into some distant future with a ceaseless desire that was redeemed from feverishness by a well-learnt patience.

Sitting under the hedgerow, I let my mind run over such events of my life as I knew of.

My first recollections were of a dull house in a dull street in a dull provincial town—a town wherein were great mills, manufactories, high chimneys, a town canopied year in, year out, by mighty clouds of smoke. It stood on the far west of the Yorkshire dales, on the lower slopes of a high, bleak hill that fell away into valleys and cloughs through which flowed the streams of water which had first brought the manufacturers there. Dominating it, playing a Vesuvius part to its part of Naples, rose the long bulk of one of the chief spurs of the Pennine range—a gaunt, black-visaged mountain, which I never could forget by day or night. It was always looking down on the town beneath—a great, ugly monster, treeless, devoid of colour, destitute of any attraction, without a smile even when the sun shone upon its death-like greyness. I have been a lover and worshipper of mountains ever, but never of this. It frowned on me and on the town when I first looked out of window in a morning; it still frowned when I peeped through

the blinds at night before going to bed. There was a small, dismal cemetery some way up the side of this mountain—a place full of those wretched monuments to the dead, barbarian in their ugliness, which English folk of a certain nature delight in. In one corner of it, my father lay buried. Once, when quite a child, I used to insist that I could remember him, but that must have been impossible, for he died before I was a year old. All the knowledge that I ever had of him was gained from hearsay. He had been the minister of some small dissenting community; he was a delicate man; he was a great reader; he was so unpractical that when he went to draw his quarter's salary it was necessary to accompany him and to lead him and it safely homewards—otherwise, sublimely indifferent to the fact that there were bills to be paid, he would have spent it all on books. Some of his books I possessed, together with a box full of his manuscript sermons, written out in a fine, nervous hand. I have understood that he was a clever and an effective preacher, but Uncle Benjamin Harrington never spoke of him as aught but a helpless, shiftless dreamer. Certainly he left no money behind him, which I count a small thing if he had accumulated the treasures of resignation and contentment in his own heart.

The dull house in the dull street was my mother's. Having no means wherewith to support herself and me after my father's death she did what so many distressed women in her condition have done before and since, and will continue to do until a wise Government makes such a foolish thing impossible—she turned schoolmistress. There was something very fitting in this, seeing that her own education, as a farmer's

daughter had been chiefly in the way of making butter, baking, cooking, plain sewing, and attending to the poultry yard. However, she was a good house-keeper, and governesses were cheap, so the front door was ornamented by a large brass plate inscribed "Select Seminary for Young Ladies"; a prospectus was printed on highly glazed paper, and the enterprise was plunged *in medias res* by the arrival of some half-dozen girls of various ages and of varying degrees of small sense and bad manners, whose parents had sent them there a little out of charity and much more because it was a cheap thing to do.

I began to notice and to ponder over things at an age when children ought to know nothing but pleasure. By the time that I was five years old I knew very well what genteel—shabby-genteel—poverty meant. I knew that it was a difficult thing to make ends meet; I knew in some dim, vague fashion that the whole thing was just kept going somehow. My poor mother had nothing but trouble. The governesses were the very devil. One drank gin. When she had drunk too much she became religious and emotional. Another was so fervent a Baptist that she never ceased beseeching everybody in the house—adults, that is—to go and be dipped. Another insisted on living out of the house so that she could devote her evenings to her dear mamma, who lived with her in lodgings. The dear mamma turned out to be a gentleman masquerading in woman's clothes, who was much wanted by the police. Then there was a French governess, who would eat garlic in the privacy of her own room, and who eventually eloped with the drawing-master, which would not have mattered a halfpenny but for the fact that he left a

draggle-tailed wife and six children behind him, who—with their friends—appeared to cherish a deep-seated conviction that my unfortunate mother ought to provide for them for ever. And finally the last of these instructresses of youth, entering into league with the cook—who, it may be not unimportant to point out, was of Welsh extraction—and taking advantage of my mother's temporary absence, looted the entire contents of the house so far as knives, silver, china, and all small movables were concerned, and having sold or pawned them, vanished into thin air.

It was this last blow that brought the seminary for young ladies to an end. It also brought my mother to her grave, and from that time, I being then six years old, my province in life was to fight my battles almost single-handed.

Not that I was without friends—no, I mean relations, which is, of course, a vastly different thing, as we all know. From time to time my mother's people came to see her. I knew all about her family from the time I was three years old. Her father was dead; her mother, Mrs. Susannah Harrington, was tenant of Highcroft Farm at Wintersleave, near Sicaster, on the eastern side of the West Riding. She had two brothers—Benjamin, who managed his mother's farm and was also a brewer in a largish way at Sicaster, and Richard, who was an artist and lived in London. She had three sisters—Sophia, who was married to Mr. William Winterbee, a prosperous draper of Kingsport, and Frances and Caroline, who were unmarried. All these people, with the exception of my grandmother and my uncle Richard, had visited us at one time or another, and I had formed my conceptions of

them. Whenever Uncle Benjamin came, my mother, for some reason unknown to me then, but recognised very well after, was invariably cast down and tearful—I know now that his visits were usually connected with financial matters, and that he used to bully his sister because she could not make the select seminary pay. Mrs. Winterbee's visits produced something of a like effect—she was prosperous herself, and there is no woman who so looks down on struggling poverty as does your rich tradesman's wife. My aunt Frances was a good woman, and would have been more attractive if she had been less religious. But she was one of those unfortunate mortals who are so devout themselves that they must needs bring others into the fold by any means, whether of a persuasive or a coercive nature, and she conceived it to be her duty, wherever she was, to speak a word in season. I liked her much better than Uncle Benjamin or Mrs. Winterbee, but I dissented from her ideas as to the proper spending of the Sabbath before I was old enough to know what the Sabbath meant.

Of all these relations I had the greatest liking for my aunt Caroline. She was much younger than the rest of them. The elder ones were all fine-looking people—big, well-built—but Aunt Caroline was something on the small side, of a dainty figure, and very pretty. She had laughing eyes and a dimple, and she possessed a rare sense of humour and was full of fun. How it was that she was so different to the rest I could never make out. She could be demure enough in her mother's presence, and solemn as a judge if her sister Frances's company—and mood—required it; but she could laugh and joke and sport in the sun

generally. I was always glad to see her—the select seminary seemed very dull after she had gone.

Being left alone in the world at this very early age, it was only natural that such relations as I possessed should assume a protectorate over me. After all, I was an offshoot of the parent stem. So I said good-bye to the dull house and the dull street and the dull, smoky town, and to the frowning hill. I never saw town or hill again for a good twenty years.

I travelled to Highcroft Farm under convoy of my aunts Frances and Caroline, to whom had been entrusted the task of winding up my small affairs. To tell the truth, I stepped out into my new world quite penniless ; when everything had been sold there was not enough money to pay off the debts, and therefore there was nothing for me. But Aunt Caroline, who had a great taste for reading, preserved for my future use a very respectable collection of my father's books, and saw to it that the chest in which she packed them, together with his box of manuscripts, was duly despatched to Highcroft Farm. So I set out, after all, better equipped than some folk who carry a heavy purse. True, most of the books were of a serious sort—histories, biographies, philosophical treatises, theological essays, and the like—but they were books, and were destined to become rare companions.

And the need for companionship soon came. From what cause it sprang no physician could ever tell me, but soon after I became an inmate of the family at Highcroft Farm I was seized with terrible pains in my left foot which continued, with little intermission, for five weary years. No child ever went through more agony than I did during that time. As

a rule, I spent six months out of the twelve on crutches, and more than once I was confined to bed for a long period; if I ever gained any relief I was haunted while it lasted by the knowledge that the pain would soon return. They did all they could for me. I grew sick of seeing physicians and surgeons and specialists who twisted my foot this way and that and never did me any good. When I think of those five years I think of them as of some horrible, unbelievable nightmare. Two things I can remember of that time with sickening terror even at this distance —how I used to beat my head on the wall against my bed out of sheer agony, and how I used to steal laudanum out of the drug-cupboard and drink it until I was stupefied—and for a time unconscious of pain.

When I was twelve years old that pain left me as suddenly as it had come. But during the five years of its reign I had learnt that nothing can be so precious to a human being in such times of trouble as the company of books. I read everything that I could lay hands on. Like all old houses, Highcroft Farm contained a great many old books. My aunt Caroline had a private collection of her own—chiefly of a romantic nature. She loved poetry. She used to read Shelley and Keats to me, and she had a decided liking for Miss Landon and for Mrs. Hemans. But her great passion was for Lord Byron, and she actually possessed a copy of "Don Juan," which she kept under lock and key in her work-box. I read every book that Aunt Caroline owned—I even read all Aunt Frances's religious books. Then there was a cupboard which contained a quantity of Uncle Richard's books—it was always kept locked; but one summer, when I was in greater pain than usual, my grand-

mother was induced to give up the key, and I found myself introduced to Dickens, and to Thackeray, and to Scott, and to a hundred odds and ends of ephemeral literature of the 'fifties and early 'sixties. And later on Aunt Caroline and myself made a wonderful discovery. There was an ancient apple-chamber in the house—a queer, cobwebbed, gloomy place, where all sorts of odds and ends were stored, the accumulations of two centuries. In one corner stood an old oak chest, green with mould. One winter, going up to the apple-loft with Aunt Caroline to fetch apples for the Christmas mince-pies, we were filled with a mutual desire to know what the old chest contained ; and, saying nothing to anybody, we contrived, after a good deal of trouble, to get the lid off, and found it packed with old books, many of which were black-letter folios. How we dried those damp old things at the kitchen fire, how we smoothed out creased pages and polished up faded bindings, how we worked at the black letter until we could read it as easily as modern typography, I can remember as keenly and clearly as I remember the events of this morning.

When I was able to walk again—in my twelfth year—and some time had gone by without a return of the awful pain, it became evident that a new phase of life was opening out before me. I was growing stronger and healthier—I should have to go to school. I had never been to school in my life ; I had never been taught anything. But I had read without cessation for five years, and I never forgot anything that I read. It had been desultory reading, but it had covered a wide range, and my retentive faculties had fixed upon everything with something like greediness of appetite. And though I could not have worked out

a rule-of-three sum to save my life, I had read history and philosophy and theology to some purpose; and if algebra was as strange to me as the North Pole, black letter was as familiar as my grandmother's parlour.

In those days Uncle Benjamin was a tame cat. He never manifested any great interest in me, and it was his belief that I was not long for this world. He left me to my aunts. He himself lived three miles away, at Sicaster, and only came to the farm at Wintersleave to see that things were going on all right. He used to bully his sisters in those days as he bullied me later on. When she saw him coming Aunt Caroline used to go to her own room, and there she stayed until he had gone, unless it was necessary that she should attend his presence. As for Aunt Frances, she was foolishly weak, and gave way to Uncle Benjamin in everything.

It was all very well, this being left to the care of my aunts during the five years in which I was a hopeless cripple, but it was not so well when it was finally determined that I was quite strong and healthy again, and must go to school. For now Uncle Benjamin was called into family council—my grandmother, unfortunately, was grown too old to have the controlling voice in matters which, by all accounts, she had once had. And Uncle Benjamin was no lover of education, and was firmly of opinion that people who have no money—through the shameful neglect or incompetence of their parents—have no right to expect to be educated. And when it was suggested to him that his nephew must now go to school he immediately replied that he had no money to spend on anybody's schooling, so I must go to the village

school, where the fees amounted to the sum of two-pence a week.

The Harringtons of Highcroft were a proud lot. My Aunt Frances bridled; my Aunt Caroline grew rosy red. As for me, I looked Uncle Benjamin carefully over, and I suddenly knew him for the first time.

"That, of course, is quite out of the question, Benjamin," said my Aunt Frances very quietly.

"I should think so!" exclaimed my Aunt Caroline. "Quite out of the question, of course, Benjamin."

Uncle Benjamin looked at Aunt Caroline with the expression which always came into his eyes whenever he looked at her at all. It was the sort of expression which people who believe themselves to be long-suffering assume when gazing upon a self-willed child.

"Oh, it's quite out of the question, is it, miss?" he said sneeringly. "Oh, indeed! I suppose his head has got stuffed so full of nonsense with all this book-learning that you think he ought to be a gentleman and go to Oxford, eh?"

"That's just what I should like to do!" I exclaimed impulsively, this family conclave being held in my presence. "Do let me go to Oxford, please, Uncle Benjamin!"

Uncle Benjamin favoured me with a look which said, as plainly as he could have voiced it in words, that his opinion of me was that I was either the most stupid young fool the world had ever seen, or utterly devoid of even elementary reason. He picked up his hat.

"I've no money to spend on educating other folks' children," he said. "I've enough to do for my own.

Let him go to the village school and learn what he can till he's old enough to be apprenticed to some trade. The sooner he knows that he'll have to earn his own living, the better for him."

With that he went out to his dog-cart and drove away. But my aunts were not of the sort to let matters rest there. Like everybody who had any of the Harrington blood in their veins, they would worry at a thing until they got it or found that its getting was impossible, in which case they would suddenly assume a philosophical stoicism, and become absolutely indifferent and, apparently, unconcerned. In this case, somewhat to my surprise, they received valuable aid from Mrs. Winterbee. Coming over unexpectedly to visit her mother, she was sounded on the matter, and unhesitatingly declared that her sisters Frances and Caroline were quite right, and that Uncle Benjamin was utterly wrong. Now that I was strong again, said Mrs. Winterbee, I must, of course, be sent to a proper school, and fitted out for a career in life. It then turned out that Mrs. Winterbee had already settled in her own mind what that career was to be. What mysterious process of thought or reasoning had led her to it I could never make out, but she was firmly convinced that I was born to be a chemist and druggist. I had never shown the slightest inclination to adopt this calling, and I am sure that if I had I should have poisoned somebody, but Mrs. Winterbee was absolutely convinced that it was my *métier*. And in family council she voiced her opinions very strongly, and so out-talked Uncle Benjamin—for she had a rare tongue, and was no more afraid of him than of one of her husband's apprentices

—that he retreated, washing his hands of the whole affair.

I was then at the mercy of my three aunts. They put their heads together; they made inquiries. By sheer evil fortune—for me—they heard of a school connected with the dissenting community of which my father had been a minister; they further heard that at this school the sons of ministers, dead and living, were received at a reduced fee. Mrs. Winterbee considered that this was the very thing for the future chemist and druggist. She said that I must go to Wethercote, and must remain there three years, then I must be apprenticed—she knew a chemist in Kingsport, an attendant at her own chapel, who would take me. I must serve my apprenticeship, and eventually I should have a shop of my own, with my name in gold letters on a powder-blue ground.

Not to break in too rudely upon Mrs. Winterbee's dream—though I had my own ideas about its fulfilment—I went to Wethercote, escorted by Aunt Caroline, who paid the preliminary fees, gave me ten shillings and a great many kisses, and went away in tears. If I had known what lay before me I, too, might have wept. For Wethercote was anything but a pleasant or a comfortable place. The house itself, a gaunt, barrack-like building, stood on the top of a hill, exposed to every wind that blew—it was winter when I went there, and we had a surfeit of east wind for weeks. It was cold and draughty, ill furnished in every way, and conducted on the notion that boys are not only as hard as nails, but that all boys are alike. I never knew what it was to be warm there; I never had a proper meal under its roof—I rose

hungry and went to bed hungry. And there was certainly no single soul in the place who cared one jot whether I was hungry or not, cold or warm, alive or dead.

As for the instruction I received there, the less said about it the better. It may be that circumstances had unfitted me for ordinary school life ; however that may be, it is certain that I did not get on in the ordinary fashion. The truth was, I knew such a lot about things in general, and such a very little about things in particular. They held a general examination of the whole school just after I got there, and set every boy—we ranged from twelve to nineteen—the same papers. I came out second in History and first in English Literature from the one hundred and fifty boys in the school—in all other subjects I came out nowhere. I knew nothing about arithmetic or grammar or any of the ordinary simple things. Nor could they ever teach me anything. I had no taste for arithmetic—it made my head ache, and I didn't know what it was all about ; and the rules of grammar seemed purposeless to me, steeped as I was in the English of Addison and Newman. If they had let me alone and allowed me to read my histories (I had brought a boxful of them with me, and the masters used to borrow them and to seek information from me about all sorts of out-of-the-way things in them) and to study logic—with which science I was just then madly in love—I should have been happy enough. As it was, I wasted their time and my own in endeavouring to do things which I had not got it in me to do. There were twenty-seven boys in my form, and I and another shared the distinction of always being twenty-sixth or twenty-

seventh. And the other boy, poor fellow, was of weak intellect.

After three months of this trifling, I weighed the matter carefully over in my mind as I lay awake one night. The result of my deliberations was that next morning—the day being Saturday—I took what money I had in my box, walked to the nearest railway station, and journeyed home; reaching which I calmly announced that the school was of no use to me and that I had left it for ever.

My Aunt Frances expostulated and reasoned; my Aunt Caroline coaxed and cajoled; it was all useless. I listened to all they had to say as I consumed the high tea which they had hastened to set before me—and, indeed, I was needing it—and then told them that it had always been impressed upon me that man lived but a short time on this earth, and that, as I wished to do something while I did live, I was not going to waste my time on people who were ready enough to believe that two and two made four but could give no intelligent reason why. After that I went to bed, and was warm for the first time for three months.

Next day Uncle Benjamin appeared upon the scene. For a man he was strangely inconsistent. Three months previously he had shown the strongest disinclination to allow me to go to Wethercote; now he was just as determined that I should not leave it. I attempted, as patiently as I could, to explain to him that my theory of education was not that of the head master or assistant masters at Wethercote, and that I also possessed decided objections to cold and hunger. I even went so far as to quote Plato to him. It was no good. Uncle Benjamin cursed me for a

born fool, and departed, vowing that he would come back next morning and, if need be, horsewhip me out of the house. After he had gone, my aunts tried more persuasion and coaxing without effect. Go back to Wethercote and its foolery I would not.

After we had had tea that Sunday afternoon I went into the garden to consider matters. That they were somewhat serious was very certain. I had enough sense to see that Uncle Benjamin, having might on his side, could drag me back to Wethercote by main force and get me fastened up there as securely as in a prison. That would never do. But how was I to prevent it? Clearly, there was but one thing to be done. I must set my wits to work; I must pit my brains against Uncle Benjamin's brute force. I walked up and down the garden seeking an illumination.

The ringing of the church bells gave me the idea that I wanted. Just before I left the village for Wethercote there had come to it a new vicar, Mr. Langton, who was said to be a great scholar. Rumour had told of the mighty chests of books which had been delivered at the Vicarage, and somebody had said that there were so many volumes in the house that it would take a week to count them. I used to regard the new vicar with envy and curiosity, and to wish that my grandmother and her family were Church folk instead of Methodists, for then, perhaps, I should have seen more of him, and might have been allowed to look at his books. And now, the bells reminding me of his existence, it occurred to me that he was possibly the very man I needed in this emergency, and I determined to go to him.

I waited until the evening service at the church

was well over, and then I walked up to the Vicarage and asked to see the vicar. I found him in his study, a large apartment lined with books from floor to ceiling. I can see him now as he stood on his hearth—a big, heavily-built man, with a decided tendency to corpulence, who dressed in the old-fashioned style, and wore frilled shirts. He seemed astonished to see me, but in five minutes we were in opposite chairs, and he was listening to all I had to say with grave and very polite attention. I was uncommonly glad to find that he seemed to agree with me on more points than one, and as he was so complaisant I came off my perch sufficiently to agree with him when he gently insinuated that, after all, mathematics was a science which deserved careful study. But I added, with cautious reserve, that I felt sure it was much more fitting to other people than to me.

I do not know how we got off this personal matter of my own, but somehow or other we strayed away into pleasanter fields. I think now that Mr. Langton must have been trying to find out how much I had read. We certainly discussed a great many books and a great many writers, and talked until a much later hour than I was accustomed to. Indeed, they had all gone to bed when I returned home, except Aunt Caroline, who thought I had run away to drown myself, and had courageously concealed from Aunt Frances the fact that I was not in my own room. To her I confided my story, together with the good news that Mr. Langton was going to write to Uncle Benjamin first thing in the morning on my behalf.

I have never known what Mr. Langton said to Uncle Benjamin, but I do know that there was no more talk of my going back to Wethercote. There

was a sort of tacit understanding that I was to remain at home for a while, at any rate. Mr. Langton gave me the run of his books, and talked to me for hours at a time. He was a keen critic and a man of taste, with a fine scorn of mere rhetoric and a profound love of classical English, and he took some pains to drill good seed into such receptive soil as I could lay open to him.

But Uncle Benjamin's nature asserted itself. If I was to stay at home it should not be in idleness. I must work for what he was pleased to call my keep. And work I did—as hard as any labourer to whom he paid wages. To work I had no objection—I grew fond of it. After all, I had my evenings to myself, and could devote them to my books, and in winter I used to read from five o'clock until ten every night. Yet I never neglected my work for my reading: Uncle Benjamin himself could not say that I did in his calm moments, though he often said so in his bad temper. The strange thing was that as time went on he and I got more and more at variance, more suspicious of each other; that he seemed to cherish an insane desire to taunt me with my poverty, and that I was equally foolish in letting him see that I despised him.

CHAPTER III.

HIGHCROFT FARM.

I HOED wheat steadily all that afternoon. I picked up my hoe as the church clock struck one, and never paused in my perambulation up and down the field until five heavy strokes came echoing across the woods and spinneys. Then, although twenty yards remained of an unfinished row, I stopped work, put on my old jacket, slung my dinner basket over the hoe, sloped the hoe over my left shoulder, and went home by the nearest way.

I had a trick of never using the roads or lanes. I knew every yard of the land in the parish, and that is saying a good deal, for in area it was one of the largest parishes in England. I knew where one could get through apparently impenetrable hedgerows, and across streams which had no bridge, and wherever I had to go I always went in a straight line. And whereas it would have taken any other person half an hour to walk from the Ten-Acre to Highcroft Farm by the usual ways, I had come within view of it in ten minutes.

Emerging from a plantation—now of a respectable height and thickness—which overhung the village, I paused, as I always did when I came that way, to look around me. Wintersleave lay rolled out before me like a map. It was a long, straggling place, running from west to east, on each side of an irregular valley from which the land rose in no more than

gentle undulations, never reaching to any great height. The old mill formed its western outpost; the alms-house its eastern: a distance of a mile and a half separated one from the other. Between these extremities were solid-looking farmsteads, grey-walled and red-roofed, with their surroundings of orchard, and garden, and stackyard; the church, with its embattled tower, and the school and school-house lying in its shadow; the high gables of the Hall showing through its barricade of elm and beech and chestnut; the Vicarage standing in its pleasant park; the little groups of labourers' cottages, each with its patch of garden; the smithy; the carpenter's shop; the general shop; and the three inns. These made up the village. Its centre-point was at the cross-roads, half-way between its two extremities. There the Great North Road bisected the village street, and a memento of its once busy and prosperous days was still left in the King George, now no more than a village inn, but once a posting-house of importance, as its great stables and coach-houses, now empty and useless, served to show. It was only thirty years before then that the coaches had ceased running—there were still old people in the village who could not understand why they had so suddenly disappeared.

I had a strange, compelling affection for this place. I loved to wander about its woods and meadows, to sit by a milestone on the Great North Road and re-people it with all the brave folk who had gone along it. Not far out of the village there was a fine remnant of the old Roman road from Danum to Legiolum—it looked for all the world like a railway embankment, covered over with grass—and I used to walk about it and think of the legions whose feet had tramped it

in the days when it must have been a mere track through the surrounding forest. Close by it was a spot whereon Henry VIII. was once received by the High Sheriff and all the nobility and gentry of Yorkshire and presented with a cup filled with gold pieces. I could sit down there, on a convenient stone-heap, and reconstruct the whole scene. Then there was the village church, a perpetual wonder and delight, with its Norman architecture, its tombs and monuments, its cross-legged effigies, its old glass, its ancient misericordes, and its crypt, wherein were the burial places of some of the big families who lived thereabouts. People used to wonder why a lad of my age should care to moon about these old places, staring at the stones as if they were living things—they did not know that to me a relic of the long-dead centuries was a much more actual influence than what they called the things of the present.

To spend one's youth in an ancient place is to be made young for ever. In the company of supreme eld no true heart can ever find time to grow old. Moreover, in such company, in the daily contemplation of a Norman arch, a scrap of old glass, even of a few yards of a road made by the Romans, one learns so much of the grandeur of man's endeavour and achievement, and recognises so clearly that true life is the lastingness of the work which man does with the time that is given him.

It was because of my affection for this old-world place that I always paused at this particular spot to look it over before going home. My final inspection was reserved for Highcroft Farm itself. It lay there before me, on the opposite side of the valley, only separated from me at that point by a long, sloping

meadow (at the foot of which, as every boy in the parish was well aware, stood a row of uncommonly fine walnut trees) and by the village street, wherein the children, freed from school for the last hour, and since refreshed with skim milk and currant bread—their staple food—were cheerily beginning their evening's play. It was a compact farmstead, Highcroft, and one of some considerable size. It lay at the village end of a long, square croft or garth, which rose gradually from the valley to the top of the high ground on the side opposite to that on which I stood, so that from my present point of vantage I could see the whole of it—the house, with its garden and orchard, the great farm-buildings grouped round three sides of the fold, the great stackyard, the little stackyard, and the paddock in which the maids used to dry the clothes. Like all the rest of the houses in Wintersleave, Highcroft, so far as colour went, was a study in grey and red. Grey walls, red roofs—that was the general rule. But about Highcroft there were splashes of brighter colour. As I looked down upon it that evening it made as gay a picture as any lover of the cheery and lightsome could desire. The orchard was full of bloom; the lilac tree which overshadowed the garden gate was a mass of delicate purple; the honeysuckle which climbed over the porch was flying its colours in honour of the June sunlight; the jessamine which covered one side of the house was filled with white and yellow stars that twinkled out of its mass of soft green, and in the flower garden the monthly roses were making a brave show of white and red. Sentinel over everything, from its superior situation on a slight knoll in the orchard, stood a giant ash, which had just sprung into

new life, and was literally Jack-a-dandy in a bright green tint.

Round about the farmhouse and the buildings evidences of farm life were in plenty. The miller's cart was drawn up at the foot of the granary steps ; from it two of the farm labourers were conveying sacks of horse-corn to the bins in the granary. On the low wall of the orchard, underneath the apple trees, old Thomas Wraby, the handy man of the farm, who had served the family for close upon fifty years without a break, and was therefore a privileged servant, was gossiping with the miller, a gaunt man whose flaming red beard was heightened in colour by his flour-whitened jacket and old billycock hat. Eliza Jane, the maid-servant, was coming across the fold from the mistal, carrying two tin pails of milk, of which she had just stripped the cows. At the stable door lounged two or three ploughmen, who had finished their work for the day and were looking forward to their six o'clock supper in the great kitchen. A lad was busy at the pump ; round its trough in a semicircle stood expectant cattle and young horses who had come down from the croft to drink. And round the kitchen door was a smaller circle of village children, chiefly girls in red cloaks and hoods, who were waiting, cans and jugs in hand, until the new milk had been cooled and strained.

In spite of a vague longing to get away into a wider world and to be and to do something else, I was always conscious that there was a true greatness in this pastoral life, and that one could learn more from its simplicity, from its surroundings, and from the men and women who live it than the world outside it knows of. In short, although Uncle Benjamin

was a sore trial, a veritable Old Man of the Mountains, I loved Wintersleave with a rare affection.

I descended the sloping meadow, paused a moment to make a critical inspection of the walnut trees—for I had always laid them under toll when autumn came round, being no more above robbing them than any other boy—I climbed the fence which shut them and the meadow in, sprang across the brook which ran down one side of the village street, and was in my own room high up in the old farmstead before anyone knew I was in the house. This was the beginning of the best part of the day. I should have a good wash, should change my working garments of darn and patches for the one decent suit I possessed ; I should have tea with Aunt Frances and Aunt Caroline ; afterwards I should get out the books to which I was just then paying particular attention, and give myself up to them for the rest of the evening. If my grandmother was not too ill, Aunt Caroline might possibly play the piano and sing some old country ballads ; she and I would certainly, before bedtime, play at least one game of chess. And, oh, joy of joys, there would be no Uncle Benjamin to cast a gloom over us ! He fortunately lived three miles away, at Sicaster, in a house close to his brewery, and it was the rarest thing in the world for him to visit us at night. Sometimes he announced that it was his sovereign pleasure to do so, and his intention of inviting some of the other farmers of Wintersleave to meet him. On these occasions, the table of the little parlour was furnished with decanters and glasses and cigar boxes and tobacco jars, and Aunt Frances and Aunt Caroline retired to spend the evening in the big parlour—drawing-room

they called it—with my grandmother. Sometimes I stayed with Uncle Benjamin and his guests—chiefly, I think, because I was useful in handing things about and in finding clean churchwarden pipes—and was much edified in hearing their talk about turnips, bad times, the various virtues of manure, and the iniquities of labouring men. As it was well known that I was an absolute pauper, and that my father had been something of the sort before me, and, moreover, that I read books, and was therefore bound to become either a thief or a forger, if not something worse—beggar-students, in their opinion, being utterly worthless and bad, and no one having any right to read except the quality, or such folk as parsons, lawyers, doctors, and the like, who were bound to live on their wits—I was invariably treated by Uncle Benjamin's guests pretty much as a starving dog is treated amidst unsympathetic company. But I had learnt to keep my countenance and to hold my tongue; moreover, I had discovered at an early stage of these proceedings that I possessed a remarkable gift of setting the members of an assemblage of this sort at variance, and there was scarcely one of Uncle Benjamin's reunions whereat I did not, by an apparently chance remark, introducing some irritating subject, set one half of the company against the other and lead them to hot words and strong language. It was easy to do it: I had only to remark that Farmer Brown's wheat was looking well in order to rouse the fierce ire of Farmer Robinson, who was sure that his looked better. But it was pleasant, even then, to feel one's power, and to be able to laugh in one's sleeve at these muddle-headed fools who never had the sense to see that the

youngster whom they persecuted with their rough and cruel jests could play upon them as easily as the wind plays with aspen leaves. However, there was no symposium of that sort down for to-night. Tomorrow, no doubt, Uncle Benjamin would descend upon us with all his wrongs rankling deeply in his breast. There were times when he could wax quite sentimental. I had a good conception of what he would say in the morning. He would speak of my ingratitude; he would drag in references to warming a viper in your bosom until it stung you; he would grow almost tearful in painting the cowardice of a boy of fifteen who could smack an innocent child of twelve across its face; he would enlarge on the enormity of my offence in lashing his hundred-guinea mare to such desperation that she ran away, and thereby endangered the valuable lives of Martha, his wife, and Bertha, his daughter, not to speak of what might have happened to himself; he would declare, not once, but twenty times, that it was only by the Lord's mercy that they were not all killed. Then he would change his tone and bully poor Aunt Frances unmercifully. He would tell her that it was all her fault. He would ask her if she didn't feel ashamed of herself. He would declare—vehemently—that this was what came of book-reading. Poor Aunt Frances would weep, gently—she did everything gently, being of a very gentle nature, despite her strong religious ideas. Then Aunt Caroline, who cared no more for Uncle Benjamin than for our turkey-cock—and, indeed, not a hundredth part so much, for our turkey-cock was as fearsome a beast to tackle as was that by which the poor Scottish idiot was “sair hadden doun”—would open fire on Aunt

Frances's behalf, and, if her temper got roused—which was very likely—would give Uncle Benjamin such “a piece of her mind” as would satisfy most men for life. And Uncle Benjamin, after first sneering at her, endeavouring to get a word in edgeways with her, and stamping the floor with impotence because of his inability to cope with her, would finally depart in as mournful a fashion as ever sincere mourner wore in going to a funeral, remarking in tones of chastened and righteous indignation that never was a man so put upon as he was.

But I had strong reason to believe that Uncle Benjamin would not say anything to me. The probability was that when he and I next met he would be as bland and suave as he was to his landlord. And I knew why very well. Children who have to fight their way in the world, who are constantly reminded of their poverty, are quick to find out the vulnerable points in the armour of their natural enemies. I had seen the sudden look of fear in Uncle Benjamin's eyes when I asked him how he got the money to pay Brewster, the village carpenter, for the posts and rails.

Having made myself tidy for the evening—my maiden aunts were praiseworthy particular about such matters as that, and have had my best thanks for it ever since—I went downstairs, as hungry as a hunter. But before going into the little parlour, where we always had a Yorkshire farmhouse high tea at six o'clock, I had to pay my duty call to my grandmother. She was now very old and feeble, and she had just then been confined to her room for some days. I knocked gently at her door; my Aunt Frances's voice bade me enter.

It was one of my grandmother's bad days; I

knew that as soon as I went into her room. I always regarded her as being something very, very old—she remembered the exciting events of Nelson's great year, and talked of Waterloo as if it had been an affair of yesterday—but I think I never realised until that June evening how very old she looked. She sat in her straight-backed elbow-chair, a very upright figure, statuesque and rigid, and you might have thought her to be a statue carved out of black and white marble rather than a living being. She always wore the same attire—a black, Quaker-like gown, bombazine on week-days, silk on Sundays, relieved of its sombreness by a great fold of spotted white lawn swathed about her neck and gathered at her bosom by a heavy gold brooch. The white lawn and the white frilled cap which framed her face were not whiter than her face itself—she suffered from some form of heart disease, and at times looked more dead than alive. At such times—and this, I saw, was one of them—she sat like a statue, with closed eyes and lips, a picture of impassive age. It was then that I used to admire her features—her high, clear-cut nose, the delicate arch of her brows, the character of her jaw and chin. She was an old grandmother to be proud of; she looked as if she had done things in her time. But I knew very well that that time had been long dead—she had been an invalid ever since the time her husband died, three years before I was born, and my Aunt Frances had had to nurse her day and night. It was only now and then that she revived to a semblance of her former self. When she did, it was the greatest treat in the world to hear her talk. She used to reconstruct the pre-Victorian age for me—I lived in the days of Farmer George,

and Wellington, and Nelson, of Trafalgar and Waterloo; I heard of the press-gang coming into the village and haling men off to Kingsport; of the farmers' carts and horses being stamped with the letters G.R. and the broad arrow, in readiness against the projected French invasion; of bonfires being laid on the hills so that the news could be flashed across the country if that invasion ever became a fact; of fractious children being cowed into obedience by threats to hand them over to Old Boney. Many a bit of ancient folk-lore, many a story of old-world superstition, did I learn from her—to hear her talk, indeed, you would have thought that all our modernity of the early 'seventies was a dream, and that we were still in the days when no one dreamt of railways or penny postage.

It suddenly struck me as I tiptoed across the room that my grandmother was growing so very old that she must soon die. Just as suddenly I wondered what the house would look like without her and her straight-backed elbow-chair, her little table with her Bible, her smelling salts, and her spectacles. And I realised that it would be like tearing the corner stone out of a building if the Old Mistress was taken from us. She heard me enter the room, and she spoke feebly, without opening her eyes.

"Who is that?"

My Aunt Frances bent down to her.

"It is Gerard, mother, come to ask you how you are."

I went forward and kissed my grandmother's cheek. She felt for and patted my hand.

"Good boy—good boy!" she murmured. "Say your prayers and mind your book. Let the boy have

an egg for his tea, Fanny—he must have an egg for his tea."

I kissed her again and said, "Thank you, grandmother," and tip-toed out of the room. My Aunt Frances followed me and closed the door behind her. She looked at me with eyes that had much more of a strange sort of wondering sorrow than reproach in them.

"Oh, Gerard!" she said; "what's this I have heard of you to-day? Your Uncle Benjamin is terribly grieved because of your conduct this morning. What made you behave so, my dear?"

"So he's been here with his tales already, has he?" I answered. "I suppose I might have expected it—he took good care not to come back to me."

"But, dear," said my Aunt Frances; "you know they might have been killed. Your Aunt Martha—"

"She's no aunt of mine," I broke in with. "You know she isn't. And you know, too, Aunt Fanny, that Uncle Benjamin can always make out a good tale for himself. Now listen to my version of it, and then you'll see that I have some right to complain," I said, and proceeded to tell her of what had led up to my attack on the mare. She listened attentively, sometimes sighing and shaking her head.

"Well," she said when I had finished, "I know what you felt, but you should remember that if we are wronged ourselves that is no reason why we should wrong those who wronged us. It is better to bear things bravely and uncomplainingly—and think what it would have meant if any of them had been killed or even hurt. Aren't you sorry, now?"

"Yes," I said. "I'm sorry—I've been sorry all the afternoon—for the mare."

My Aunt Frances sighed again, but I do not think it was altogether on account of my wickedness.

"Well, go down and get your tea, dear," she said. "Your Aunt Caroline is in the parlour. I must stop with your grandmother. And if your Uncle Benjamin comes to-morrow tell him you're sorry."

"No!" I said. "For I'm not. He treats me like a dog—and I'm not sorry, Aunt Fanny."

She sighed again and went back to my grandmother's room. It was clear to me that my Aunt Frances was not altogether on the side of Uncle Benjamin, however weak she was when he was present in the flesh. And I began to wonder why she looked troubled whenever Uncle Benjamin's name was mentioned.

I went down into the little parlour. Aunt Caroline and I had tea together. My grandmother had said that I must have an egg, but I am sure I had quite three, perhaps four, and there was a fine cold boiled ham, of our own feeding and curing, and some of Aunt Frances's famous apricot jam, and the tea itself, mixed by Aunt Caroline out of two caddies, one containing green and the other black, was a vastly different brew to the cat-lap that one gets now that India and Ceylon have usurped the rightful place of China. We were very merry and friendly over tea, Aunt Caroline and I, and we said nothing that could interfere with assimilation or digestion. But after tea was over and we had gone out into the garden to settle upon a likely place for setting up some bee-hives, Aunt Caroline suddenly referred to the event of the morning.

"So you had another scene with Benjamin to-day, Jerry?" she said. "Tell me all about it."

For the second time within an hour I gave my version of what had occurred in the Ten-Acre. Aunt Caroline listened in silence, and she sighed now and then, just as Aunt Frances had sighed. When I had made an end of my story she took a turn or two about the garden path, and coming back to me motioned me to sit down at her side on a rustic seat which I had recently set up under the apple trees.

"Jerry," she said, with more earnestness than she usually displayed about anything, "I want you to tell me something. What did you mean when you told Benjamin that you knew where he got the money to pay for the posts and rails? Tell me."

I kept silence for a moment, thinking.

"I shouldn't have said that to him, Aunt Carrie," I replied at last, "if he hadn't maddened me so. I'm sorry now that I did say it—but only because it may have done him some harm with Martha. *She* saw there was something in what I said. You should have seen her look at him!"

"Yes," said Aunt Caroline; "but—what did you mean, Jerry?"

"Well," I replied, with some reluctance, "I meant what I said. I do know where he got the money. You see, Aunt Carrie, there's—well, there's some talk in the village about Uncle Benjamin. They say that he's not—sound."

She turned and looked at me searchingly.

"Who says so?" she asked.

"I'll tell you all about it, Aunt Caroline," I replied, thinking that I might as well share with her a secret that had bothered me a good deal. "You know what a gossip Brewster, the carpenter, is? Well, when I was in his shop the other day ordering the

new cart, he got talking about Uncle Benjamin—he knows very well, as all the village knows, that there's no love lost between me and him, and he said, with a good many winks and nods, that he could tell a bit about Uncle Benjamin if he liked. And you know, Aunt Carrie, how easy it is to get a man like Brewster to talk, especially if you let him see how clever you think he is. I soon had it all out of him. You know Brewster made a lot of posts and rails for the farm three years ago, and although he was always pestering Uncle Benjamin for the money he could never get it—didn't get it until a fortnight since. And this was how he got it. Mr. Downes, the under-steward, you know, told Brewster that he must settle up his wood bill or he would sue him. Brewster went to Uncle Benjamin and begged for his money. Uncle Benjamin told him to meet him at the Golden Swan in Sicaster on market-day, and he should have it. Brewster went there on the Saturday and waited for Uncle Benjamin in the bar-parlour. There were two or three other men there—Mr. Downes amongst them. After a while Uncle Benjamin looked in, and without taking any notice of Brewster, called Mr. Downes out. They were away for ten minutes or so—then Uncle Benjamin came back alone, with some bank-notes in his hand. He told Brewster he couldn't pay him in full, but there was fifty pounds on account. Brewster said he was glad to get that. Then Uncle Benjamin took a receipt and went away. After a time Mr. Downes came in again and asked Brewster if he had got that bit of money for him. Brewster handed over the fifty pounds. Mr. Downes looked at the notes and seemed much surprised. 'Where did you get these, my lad?' he asked. Brewster

replied that he had just got them from Mr. Harrington. ‘Darn him!’ said Mr. Downes. ‘It isn’t ten minutes since he borrowed them from me!’ Then they talked, and Mr. Downes said to Brewster that he was afraid there was something wrong.”

My Aunt Caroline listened to this in silence, and her usually smiling face became very grave.

“I’m afraid I’ve thought there was something wrong, too, Jerry,” she said, sighing. “If there is it is all because of that stupid, foolish woman’s pride and that detestable house. I think Benjamin must have been mad when he allowed her to persuade him to that!”

I knew what she meant. Uncle Benjamin was building a new house in Sicaster. Martha had ambition—the sort of ambition that leaps proudly towards a grand house, new furniture, thick carpets, no books, bad pictures, and at least four servants. The comfortable old house by the brewery in which she and Uncle Benjamin had lived since their marriage was now much too humble and commonplace; besides, it was not in the fashionable quarter of the town. And so Uncle Benjamin had bought a piece of land in a most desirable situation, and was thereon erecting a mansion in red brick, which, when finished, would be at least four times too big for him and his family, even counting the retinue of servants which Martha had set her mind upon keeping.

“It’s all that wretched house!” repeated Aunt Carrie. “It must be costing thousands and thousands of pounds. He can’t afford it. And, Jerry, do you know that Benjamin has all our money?”

I turned sharply upon her.

“Whose money?” I said.

"His mother's, and Fanny's, and mine—and I believe, though I don't know, that there may be a little of yours. I don't know what your mother had before she died, but there may be a little," said Aunt Carrie. "And—if Benjamin—went down—we should all be ruined. We should—What's that cab doing here, Jerry?"

I looked across the garden. A cab was drawing up at our garden gate—a cab obviously hired from the Golden Swan at Sicaster. The door opened—a big man in a travelling coat of extraordinarily large pattern got slowly out and looked up at the old house. At the sight of him Aunt Caroline rose to her feet, white and trembling. She gripped my shoulder almost convulsively.

"Oh, Gerard!" she murmured. "Gerard! It's—it's your Uncle Richard!"



"GERARD! IT'S—IT'S YOUR UNCLE RICHARD."

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CHAPTER IV.

UNCLE RICHARD.

YOU can only gain an idea of what this sudden, unexpected arrival of Uncle Richard Harrington meant to me by considering the atmosphere of mystery which so far as I was concerned had always shrouded him and his life. I had at that time lived at Highcroft Farm for eight years: during the whole of that period Uncle Richard had never been home. Indeed, he had not been seen in Wintersleave since his father's death. Sometimes, when I was younger, listening to conversations between Aunt Frances and Aunt Caroline, I heard vague hints and rumours about him. My Aunt Frances had once paid a visit to some friends in London—that was when I was about eleven years old—and had seen him during her stay there. She seemed troubled about him when she returned, and she and her sister talked a good deal of him, but I could not make out the meaning of the things they said, though I understand that the great cause of Aunt Frances's grief was that Richard never attended a place of worship. I gathered that he was not at all like Uncle Benjamin, and that they had never had any tastes in common, and that my grandmother was sorely grieved because her younger son was not a professor of religion—I believe she had wished him to be a minister. I knew that he was an artist of some repute, that he exhibited pictures at the Royal Academy, and that he could sell them for what

seemed to me large sums of money. Somebody—I forget who it was—who was making a call at the house, had once spoken to Aunt Frances in my presence of her “famous” brother. She turned very red and uneasy, and I was sharp enough then to see that the mere mention of Uncle Richard’s name was sufficient to cause discomfort in our quiet household. But what it was in him or about him that was strange, why he either kept aloof, or was held aloof, I had never been able to make out. He was to me an interesting something-far-off, a fascinating mystery. Sometimes Mr. Winterbee, my Aunt Sophia’s husband, used to see him in London, and would talk to me in vague terms about him next time he came with his wife on one of their frequent visits to Highcroft Farm.

“Strange fellow, your Uncle Richard, you know, Gerard!” he would say. “Rum card, sir, rum card, your Uncle Richard. Clever man, you know, clever man, Gerard. Patronised by the nobs, sir, patronised by the nobs—great hand with his pencil. But strange fellow—stra-a-ange fellow, sir. One of these men of genius, you know, Gerard, one of these men of genius. All mad, sir, all mad—mad as March hares.”

Then Mr. Winterbee would nod and wink and say, “Um-um!” and repeat his last phrase, and by more winks and nods and by flourishes of his pocket-handkerchief would give me to understand that men of genius might be all very well, but that a steady-going family business in a big town like Kingsport was an infinitely superior thing to being a famous artist and selling pictures to aristocratic patrons.

“Live hand to mouth, these fellows, you know, Gerard,” he would say—“Live hand to mouth, sir.

Easy come, easy go, you know. Nothing substantial about them, Gerard, nothing substantial—no ballast. Eccentricities of genius, sir, eccentricities of genius. Generally cut up very badly—never die warm men."

Then he would counsel me to save every penny I ever got hold of (excellent advice, considering that with the exception of a stray half-crown which he himself presented me with now and then, and an occasional shilling from my aunts, who were hard up enough themselves, I never had any money), and remark with more winks and nods and flourishes that it was no use making a lot of money if you spent it as fast as you handled it. Wherefrom I gathered that Uncle Richard was—well, I had only the vaguest idea of what he was. I think I connected him somehow with the Prodigal Son, and when I was much younger I used to wonder which of the calves my grandmother would kill when he came home.

However, here was Uncle Richard in the flesh—come home at last after a great many years. There was a strange curiosity, an unusual interest in my mind as I followed Aunt Caroline down the garden to greet him. I looked at him as if he were a visitant from another sphere—and indeed to me at that time London was a thing of exceeding far-offness: I, you must remember, had scarcely been beyond the borders of our own parish. To see someone who knew London, lived in it, was part of it, seemed a marvellous thing. Even Mr. Winterbee possessed an added glory when he returned from one of his periodical visits to the metropolis; how much more, then, should Uncle Richard shine who, by adoption, was a son of that mysterious city!

Making a careful inspection of him as I drew

near, I saw with a good deal of pleasure that Uncle Richard in no way resembled Uncle Benjamin. Indeed, I could not see any likeness between him and any member of the family. They were all tall; Uncle Richard was a man of no more than medium height, rather broadly built, and somewhat inclined to stoutness. As he caught sight of Aunt Caroline and lifted his great slouch hat—a sort of hat which I had never seen before—I found myself staring in amazement at the size of his head and at the extraordinary fashion in which he wore his hair. It was very long hair and very black, but with many patches of grey and even white in it, and it tumbled all over the great dome of his forehead, and seemed to get into his eyes, and covered his ears, and fell in ripples and curls about his neck, and was altogether so thick and long, and so hid most of his face, that I instinctively thought of Mr. Langton's Skye terrier. But all of Uncle Richard was curious and uncommon. He had a beard black as his hair, and shot, like it, with grey and white; it was trimmed to a point, and had a trick of standing straight out before him when he lifted his chin and peered speculatively at you through half-closed eyelids. Then he had a very fierce moustache, brushed upwards in points that nearly touched his ears. This, and his pointed beard and his fantastic hair, gave him the wildest and most uncommon appearance. I certainly had never seen anything like him in my life. Nor had I ever seen a man dressed in such a fashion. He wore a knickerbocker suit made of a Highland plaid of the most striking colours, and his legs were encased in bright scarlet stockings round the turn-down of which was embroidered a strange device in black. His shirt

collar appeared to be of coarse grey flannel and was cut very low, showing a wide expanse of bare throat and neck. But the chief wonder of all was his necktie, a voluminous thing of the same shade of brilliant scarlet as his stockings. It was tied in a great bow, whereof two ends made backgrounds to his beard and moustaches, and two fell downwards over his chest like window curtains. In the centre of the bow shone a great brooch of pearls and diamonds. There were more diamonds in his watch-chain, and the fingers of his long, slender, delicately shaped hands were covered with rings, most of them as fantastic and bizarre as his general appearance.

He greeted Aunt Caroline with a polite bow, and came up the garden path to meet her, gazing at her with a keen scrutiny in which I detected a good deal of tenderness. His lips moved a little as he approached us, but he did not speak—the movement changed to a smile.

"Richard!" said my Aunt Caroline tremblingly. "We—we did not expect you." It seemed a lame thing to say, a cold welcome, but Uncle Richard evidently understood. He took his sister's hand and kissed her cheek.

"No—no!" he said. "No—of course you didn't expect me. If I had told you I was coming, I should most likely not have come. You see, Carrie—it is Carrie, of course—I wanted to see the old place again. It was time. My mother—how is she?"

"It is one of her bad days, Richard," my Aunt Caroline answered, with an anxious glance at the window above us. "We must be very quiet—she cannot bear any shock. We must break the news of your arrival very quietly."

"If my coming will upset anything," he said, "I will go to the inn."

"No, no!" Aunt Caroline said hurriedly. "Of course not; let us get quietly into the house." Then, seeing him glance at me—indeed, he had been regarding me with much curiosity for the last minute—she added: "This is Gerard Emery, poor Mary's boy, Richard."

Uncle Richard gave me his hand. He pressed mine very cordially, even affectionately.

"How are you, my lad?" he said. "I knew your father—he was a good man, and the most rapacious bookworm that ever ate books. Well, now, Caroline," he continued, turning to his sister and pacing back towards the cab, "I have brought a little friend of mine with me, Sylvia Leighton. The child wants a breath of country air. There will be room for her?"

"Is it—your—late housekeeper's child?" asked Aunt Caroline in a low voice.

"Exactly—and my ward," answered Uncle Richard. "A dear child. Gerard here must show her round the woods and fields. Sylvia, come out!"

A girl's face, framed in a white linen sun-bonnet, appeared at the open window of the cab, then the child herself, looking from Aunt Caroline to me as if she felt anxious to know what sort of people my Uncle Richard had brought her to see. A sudden feeling of great shyness came over me—I was conscious of my big boots, my toil-stained hands, my country clothes. I had never had much to do with other young people, especially with girls, and the prospects of meeting, and being obliged to speak to, a London miss who would, no doubt, give herself airs, filled me with dismay. My examination of Uncle

Richard's companion was more anxious than furtive, though I confess that it was made from behind Aunt Caroline. For some extraordinary reason which I could never account for, I was glad to find that Sylvia was not what is commonly called a pretty child. She seemed to be younger than myself, but something about her suggested an acquaintance with life and the world of which I could not yet boast. I think her hair was inclined to a sandy hue, her mouth was odd, and could indicate many moods, her nose was something of a snub, and I am sure she was freckled. But even then she had wonderful eyes—"big as saucers," my Aunt Winterbee said—and she had a trick of fixing them upon anybody which was somewhat disconcerting. Indeed, she bent her gaze upon me with such attention that, after Aunt Caroline conducted our guests into the parlour and I and one of the farm labourers had carried their portmanteaux into the kitchen, I felt so overcome by shyness—all because of that critical inspection—that I went and hid myself in the garden, making believe that I had some work to do, and remained wandering in its farthest recesses for nearly an hour before I could summon sufficient courage to return to the house. When at last I walked into the parlour, the lamp was lit, the curtains drawn. Uncle Richard and Sylvia were doing justice to an excellent supper, and my aunts were sitting in their easy chairs, watching these denizens of another world with wondering eyes. Poor women! I could see how their hearts yearned over this curious looking brother of theirs, and how pleased they would have been—Aunt Frances, at any rate—if he had been something more normal. I saw Aunt Caroline gaze wonderingly, and then smilingly,

at his hair, his tie, his Highland plaid. But Uncle Richard, with a prime sirloin of cold beef before him, and a jug of our home-brewed ale at his elbow, was oblivious of any critical inspection of himself. He ate and drank heartily, like a hungry man who possesses a naturally healthy appetite, and it was obvious that new surroundings made little difference to him. Sitting in a corner and watching our guests as if they were new specimens of mankind—as, indeed, they were to me—I wondered at the ease and readiness with which my Uncle Richard talked. He chatted away to my aunts as if he and they had been seeing each other every day since they were born, instead of having been parted for many years. He spoke of things that were being done in London, of books, and pictures, and music, and the theatre—poor Aunt Frances grew uncomfortable when that topic was mentioned—with an amazing familiarity; he mentioned people of his acquaintance—poets, artists, great folk—who to me had seemed so far off that I could scarcely believe they were really human beings walking the earth. I could see that Aunt Caroline liked to hear all this: she got to the table at last and propped her elbows on it, and her chin on her hands, and drank in all Uncle Richard's flow of talk—it was seldom that anyone ever talked in our house except of farming and the latest village gossip, or of religious matters. And I do not think that Aunt Frances was averse to Uncle Richard's brilliant conversation; it was easy to see that she was proud of him, though she did not understand him.

Every now and then I saw the eyes of both women turn upon the girl with a sort of half-shy curiosity. There was something in their expressions—especially

in that of Aunt Frances—which I did not understand. There was appreciation of the cleverness in the child's large, eloquent eyes; there was also something half-pitiful, half-regretful. It required little observation to see that both ladies were wondering, speculating about her. And more than once, as she and Uncle Richard exchanged remarks, or turned to each other for corroboration of a story or illustration of something said, I saw them look from the man's face to the child's with a wistfulness which I could not account for. They looked as if they were searching for something which was hard to discover. They were very kind and attentive, and even affectionate to Sylvia, and the girl was quick to recognise that they were. They were kind, too, to Uncle Richard. When the travellers had supped and the table had been cleared, Aunt Caroline carried Sylvia away to look over the old house, and Aunt Frances, producing the keys, brought out the spirit case, and got hot water and lemons and sugar, and set these matters, with the cigars and the tobacco, before her brother. Then she laid her hand on his shoulder with the half-timid kindness which was one of her chief characteristics.

"We are very glad to see you, Richard," she said gently. "It seems a long time since you were under the old roof. Now you must help yourself," she went on, laughing a little nervously as she pointed to the things she had set before him. "I'm afraid we can't give you what you're accustomed to, but——"

"Nonsense, my girl!" said Uncle Richard, patting her arm affectionately. "Old Dick Harrington's no sybarite—a pipe of plain Cavendish and a drop of sound whisky's good enough for him."

"Well, I must go upstairs to your mother," she

said. "You shall see her in the morning, Richard. Gerard, you will keep your uncle company."

I said I would, though I had scant ideas of what was expected of me. But I soon found that Uncle Richard was one of those men who can not only keep themselves company, but can entertain whatever company they are thrown amongst. As soon as Aunt Frances had left the room he produced a well-polished briar pipe, filled it with tobacco from the old jar, and began to puff out multitudinous clouds of smoke. Then he mixed himself a tumbler of whisky and water and nodded over its brim to me as he lifted it to his lips.

"Your good health, Gerard, my boy," he said. "May your shadow never grow less!"

I thanked him very seriously and politely, and returned his good wishes, though not in such figurative language. He bowed very gravely, smiling a little, as if he thought me a very old-fashioned youngster, and then he set himself on the hearthrug, with his scarlet-habited legs planted wide apart, and, pipe in mouth and hands in pockets, favoured me with a long, critical stare. I stared back at him.

"You're very like your father, my lad," he said at last. "Poor Robert—he was fond of his book and his pipe—he once nearly killed me with some black Virginia that he had. Don't you ever smoke strong tobacco, my son, and don't smoke at all till you're grown up. There's a bit of sound advice for you. And what are you doing now? At school, eh?"

"No, Uncle Richard," I answered. "I am working."

"Working? What at?" he asked. "You're young to work, lad."

"I work on the farm," I answered. "I have been hoeing wheat all to-day in the Ten-Acre."

He sat down, straddling across a chair, and leaning his arms on its back he stared at me harder than ever.

"Do you mean to say they haven't sent you to school?" he asked after another critical inspection.

"Yes," I replied. "They sent me to school, but I wouldn't stay there. I came away because I was only wasting my time. They had a bad system of teaching there."

He gripped his pipe between his teeth, and still staring hard at me, wagged it and his beard so much that I wondered what he was doing. Then his face suddenly became fixed again, and he nodded his head at me.

"Go on," he said. "Tell me all about it, lad."

I found it as easy to talk to him as to Mr. Langton —like Mr. Langton, he was a good listener. And I told him everything about myself, feeling with some sure instinct that he understood. He listened silently, never taking his eyes off me. Sometimes he nodded his head, sometimes he wagged his beard and his pipe again, once or twice he made a curious clicking noise with his tongue, and when I came to tell him of my encounter with Uncle Benjamin that morning, he drank off his whisky and water in a series of very loud gulps, mixed himself some more, took a great draught of it, said "Ah!" very appreciatively, and then burst into a peal of laughter which made the old rafters ring again.

"I'm afraid you're a handful to manage, Master Gerard!" he said. "However, you seem to have followed your father's footsteps as a bookworm. Show me what you've been at lately."

There was one corner of the parlour which my aunts had given up to me for my own. It had a sort of recess in which Aunt Caroline and I had rigged up a lot of shelves for my books. Brewster, the gossiping carpenter, had made us the shelves, and we had fixed them ourselves and painted them, and arranged the books on them. Underneath I had an old oak table furnished with a lamp and writing materials. This was my study, wherein I spent my evenings. As the rest of the parlour was, as a rule, tenanted only by my aunts, who were generally employed in sewing, or fancy work, or reading, and who, if they conversed, did so in low voices, I was as quiet in my corner as readers are in the reading-room of the British Museum.

I conducted Uncle Richard to this retreat. His pipe began to wag again as he scanned the shelves. Once or twice he stretched out a long, slender finger and tapped a book on the back as if he had been patting some old friend on the shoulder, and I knew that he recognised the volumes so treated as having belonged to my father.

"Have you read all these, boy?" he asked at last.

"Every one," I answered. "I've read every book in the house, and lots more that Mr. Langton, the vicar, has lent me."

"And you keep it all in your head?" he asked.
"Got a good memory, eh?"

"I don't think I ever forget anything," I made answer.

"Well," he said, going back to the hearthrug, "if you aren't going to school you're schooling yourself, lad. Stick to the good stuff—you'll have plenty of time to read for mere amusement in the days to come.

Get hold of all the knowledge you can and burn it into you. And as regards working on the farm—well, that'll not do your health any harm. Fresh air, plain food, sound sleep—ah, they're grand things, youngster. But, of course, you can't go on working on the land all your life. Tell me what you want to do."

I felt diffident about voicing my secret aspirations.

"I—I should like to write books," I said at last.

"Just so," said Uncle Richard. "It would be a funny thing if you hadn't some tastes that way. And I'll warrant you've got something put away in the old desk there, eh?"

In that he was quite right. I had some historical essays, written after the style and fashion of the late Lord Macaulay, and a collection of verses, imitated from various poets, notably Alexander Pope and Lord Byron. I hung my head as Uncle Richard put his question.

"Aye, I thought so," he said. "Let me have a look at them, lad—I'll warrant they aren't half as raw as my first attempts at making a picture were."

I put the precious manuscripts in his hand and stood by with beating heart while he looked them through. He went through the pipe-wagging process several times as he turned the sheets over, and sometimes—in considering the historical essays—he nodded and grunted.

"There, lad," he said, handing me the manuscripts back at last, "put them away. Go on with your writing—it's good exercise for you. But read more than you write, and don't let anybody ever persuade you to print a word until you're sure and certain that it ought to be printed. You'll write a book some day—never fear!"

That made me very proud—I worshipped Uncle Richard. And I was so delighted that when my Aunt Caroline brought Sylvia back a few minutes afterwards I felt no longer shy, but began to talk to her, and presently she and I were together in my own corner of the room, gabbling away as if we had been old friends, while Aunt Caroline and Uncle Richard, and after a while Aunt Frances, talked in low tones in the great window-seat which looked out upon the darkening lawn.

Of what Sylvia and I talked I have but an impression. I showed her my books—it turned out that she, although she was only thirteen, was a great reader herself. But her reading was not my sort of reading—it appeared to be confined almost entirely to the drama, to dramatic poetry, to fairy lore, and to old folk-songs and ballads, some of which she promised to recite to me. We grew very confidential. She told me that she was going to be a great actress, and that her chief ambition was to play Lady Macbeth. I also learnt that her father and mother were dead and that Uncle Richard had taken care of her ever since she was a child. She seemed to regard Dick, as she called him, as a sort of big brother, and it was plain to see that they were very fond of each other. Dick, she said, was the best man living, and the kindest; he took her to the theatre and bought her books and went long walks with her all over London, and once, when she was ill, he had nursed her night and day.

I was so excited by the events of the evening that I could scarcely sleep that night. When I did sleep at last it was to dream that I was a great poet, that Uncle Richard had made magnificent illustrations to

an edition of my works in twelve volumes octavo, and that Sylvia was setting the town on fire by her rendering of the principal part in my great tragedy.

It was raining so heavily next morning that there was not the slightest prospect of going out to work in the land. After breakfast I covered Sylvia up in an old waterproof of Aunt Caroline's, and took her round the farm buildings. She had never seen a North-country farm before, and the granary, the stables, the cow-houses, hay-lofts, and barns might have been fairy palaces. She rolled in the hay, slid down the straw piled up in the barns, tried every machine we came across from the potato-washer to the turnip-drill, and was as eager and excited about all she saw as I should have been had I suddenly been dropped in the heart of London. Her enthusiasm was infectious—I found myself laughing and light-hearted.

In the big barn our younger farm lads or some of the labourers' children had fixed up a swing with one of the long cart-ropes. Nothing would prevent Sylvia from trying it. I had to make her a comfortable seat out of an old malt-sack, and then to start her off and to keep her going. Once off she wanted to go higher and faster. It was in the midst of her demands for an accelerated pace that Uncle Benjamin's face and shoulders appeared over the half-door of the barn. His eyes, screwed up a little, took in the scene at a glance—he smiled. It was a sad thing that there was always the suspicion of a sneer in Uncle Benjamin's smile.

"Dear-a-dear!" said Uncle Benjamin. "Swinging, eh? Well, to be sure! And who is this nice little lady, I wonder? Don't jump out of the swing, my dear—stay in, stay in!"

Uncle Benjamin's voice was very suave and bland. It was just as I had expected. He was going to be very nice to me because I had become acquainted with the posts-and-rails affair and knew far more than I ought to have known.

"It is Sylvia Leighton," I made answer. "She came here last night—with Uncle Richard."

I have rarely seen a man show such surprise as Uncle Benjamin did when he heard his brother's name pronounced. His face suddenly reddened, increased in colour until it was almost black, and his brows drew together in a straight vertical line. He looked at me as if had dealt him some hard blow.

"Your Uncle—who?" he snapped out.

"Uncle Richard Harrington," I answered. "Your brother."

His face cleared as quickly as it had clouded. He laughed a little—forced laughter.

"Deary-me to-day!" he said. "To think of that, now! So your Uncle Richard is here, is he? In the house, of course. I must go in to see him. And this young lady came with him, did she? To be sure—your mother was a great friend of Richard's, eh, my dear?"

He was watching Sylvia with something of the same earnest attention which my aunts had bestowed upon her the night before, but without their wistfulness. It seemed to me that he was looking for something in her face. And Sylvia, on her part, was watching him with a direct, steady gaze. She did not answer his question at once, but after a moment she inclined her head towards him in a fashion which suggested that there was no need to use words.

"Aye, to be sure, to be sure!" said Uncle Benjamin. "Well, my dear, I hope the country air will do you good. Take this young lady to see the calves, Gerard. I must say how-do-you-do to your Uncle Richard."

He got down from the top step of the barn door and went off in the direction of the house. Sylvia and I looked at each other.

"Is that Dick's brother?" she asked.

I nodded, watching her.

"I don't like him," she said. "Do you?"

"No!" I replied stoutly. "I don't, indeed."

She got out of the swing, which had come to a standstill. It was plain that Uncle Benjamin's advent had wrought some change in her mood. And after roaming a little more about the farm buildings, she suggested that we should return to the house. There, in the little parlour, we found Uncle Benjamin and Uncle Richard smoking together, with a jug of home-brewed ale between them. I had never seen Uncle Benjamin so companionable or agreeable in all my life.

CHAPTER V.

NEW WORLDS.

IF I had not been so very young and so inexperienced as I was at that time, I should have understood the reason of Uncle Benjamin's exceeding cordiality towards his brother. The Harringtons were implicit believers in reserve, and it was one of their cardinal principles that grown-up people should never talk of business or private affairs before young folk. My Aunt Caroline was not so rigid in the observance of this principle as the rest of them, but she knew how to hold her tongue, and though she made me her confidant in many things, there were other matters of which she never spoke to me. She, like all the rest, could be silent when she thought it wise to be so. If she had liked, she could have told me why her elder brother, who had not a single taste in common with her younger one, took particular pains on this occasion to be very civil to him, and even to show, in a somewhat shy, sheepish fashion, that he considered him a very clever man.

The truth was that at this time Uncle Richard Harrington was doing very well, so far as money-making was concerned. That was the only sort of doing well which Uncle Benjamin understood. With him and the other farmers of the village, the cronies who came to join in the glass-and-pipe symposium of which I have told you, the only criterion of successful work was how much was to be made out of

it. They estimated a man's worth by the contents of his pocket and the balance at his bank. All unknown to me—for he himself never said a word of it, and Sylvia, if she knew of it, kept a silence which was marvellous for her years—Uncle Richard was just then in the full flower of prosperity. He had sent to the Royal Academy that spring the most famous landscape he ever painted—"Saxonstowe Castle—Daybreak"—and it had been purchased for twelve hundred guineas by the Earl of Saxonstowe, whose successor, I am told, considers that his father acquired it very cheaply. There had been a great deal in the newspapers about this picture and the price paid for it—the highest price paid for a landscape that year—and Uncle Richard's family had heard of it. It was like them to refrain from speaking of it before me or their neighbours; it may have been that Uncle Richard's former reputation for generous living inclined them to conceal the fact that he had so much money put into his pockets at one time. But they knew all about it, and no one better than Uncle Benjamin and Mr. Winterbee. And if painting pictures seemed to them a not altogether respectable way of earning one's living, they at any rate possessed sufficient sense to know that the money so earned was as good as if it had been gained by selling silks or growing wheat.

I never knew anything of the reception which Uncle Richard met with at the hands of his mother. He did not see her until the afternoon of the day following his arrival, and I think it must have been an emotional meeting, for when Sylvia and I—who, the rain having cleared off, had been exploring the village—came in to tea, we noticed that Aunt

Frances and Aunt Caroline bore traces of tears, though they and Uncle Richard—Uncle Benjamin had gone home before dinner—seemed to be very happy. Somehow Uncle Richard's arrival appeared to have produced a good effect on my grandmother's health, for the next morning it was announced that she was coming downstairs again as soon as the sun and a fire had warmed the big parlour, and great preparations were made for installing her in a massive easy chair, upholstered in black horsehair and ornamented with brass nails, which no one but herself ever sat in. She came down in great state about eleven o'clock, and when she had been duly installed and refreshed with a little weak brandy and water, we all felt as the Lords and Commons no doubt feel when the reigning Monarch is seated on the Throne in their midst. Sylvia said afterwards that my grandmother looked like a great lady of the eighteenth century. She made a profound curtsey to her when she was led up to the big black chair to be formally presented, and called her "Ma'am" when she answered her hostess's questions, and she accepted it as quite the fitting thing when my grandmother bade her to mind her book and her sewing, and commanded Aunt Frances to give her a fresh egg for her tea and to see that she had new milk first thing every morning.

After dinner that day my grandmother took her usual nap, in order to facilitate the coming on and successful carrying out of which we were all dismissed from the big parlour. An hour later, my grandmother having awoke much refreshed and feeling very well for her, there began a grand treat—Uncle Richard was going to show us his sketch-books and some of

his water-colours and black-and-white drawings. To me, that afternoon was a revelation—one of the great days to be marked with a white stone. There were not many pictures in the farmhouse, and most of them were family portraits, painted, I think, by local artists, whose talents would have been more fittingly employed on the signboards of wayside inns. In the little parlour we boasted some old steel engravings of such celebrities as George the Third—a monarch for whose memory my grandmother retained a great respect and affection—Napoleon Buonaparte, the Duke of Wellington, Robert Burns, and Lord Palmerston. In the big parlour there were two very large engravings, one representing John Wesley preaching from his father's tomb in Epworth Churchyard; the other exhibiting Martin Luther before the Diet of Worms. Here and there about the house were some early pencil sketches of Uncle Richard's, and several studies of flowers—very brilliantly coloured—by Aunt Caroline. These, with various ancient samplers, the once gorgeous hues of which had not faded, made up our mural decorations, and I had always considered them very grand. Even the dining-room at the Vicarage, which was the most sumptuous apartment I had so far been permitted to see, only contained some large steel plates and a small collection of views of Oriel College.

Having, therefore, never seen anything in the way of colour it was a wonderful thing to be allowed to turn over Uncle Richard's sketch-books. It was not until that afternoon that I learnt that he had travelled a great deal in search of subjects for his brush and pencil. Here in one sketch-book was the record of a

springtime spent in Spain. I thought of the monotony of our skies and landscapes, and marvelled at the glorious blues and reds and greens and yellows and at the art which could depict them with such effect. Here was another book filled with pencil-drawings of Rome, and another with water-colour studies of Italian scenes and people. That anyone whom I knew, to whom I had actually spoken, should have been to Rome! I have seen Rome since then, but I am not sure that my first view of it gave me the same pleasure which I felt on seeing Uncle Richard's pictures. For in those days Rome seemed so far off that I could scarcely believe it to be in our world. I gazed on Uncle Richard with great awe and veneration, which increased as the pictured records of his travels were put into my hands. He had seen the Highland lochs and the Norwegian fiords; he had tramped through Brittany and journeyed in a boat down the Danube; nay, he had even been to Egypt and up the Nile, and had seen the Pyramids and the Sphinx! That last fact afforded my grandmother the greatest delight; she immediately wanted to know if he had seen the place where Moses was hidden amongst the bulrushes.

Uncle Richard kept his best wine to the last. When we had finished looking over the sketch-books and portfolios he favoured us with an enigmatical smile, and said that he would now show us something that really was worth looking at. Then he bade me go with him to his room and help him to carry something downstairs. In his room we found a large wooden packing-case, the removal of which he had been very particular about on his arrival two days before. He got the top off this after some struggling

with nails and screws, and drew out from amongst much straw and paper what I knew to be a large picture in a heavy frame. What the subject was I could not then see—frame and picture were hidden from view by a stout wrapping of green cloth. The spirit of curiosity rose strong within me: I wished that Uncle Richard would give me a private view of whatever it was that we were to carry downstairs.

Arrived in the parlour with our burden, Uncle Richard directed Sylvia to place three of the stoutest chairs in such a position that the light would fall upon his picture to the best advantage. He made us all stand in a certain position. Then he began to strip the picture, aided by Sylvia. While he was thus engaged he wagged his pipe and his beard—a sign, as I knew by that time, that many emotions were crowding his soul. Finally, having cast the green cloth aside, and left the picture uncovered but for a sort of paper curtain, he suddenly removed the latter and stepped back with a laughing invitation to us to gaze upon his work.

It was a picture of Highcroft Farm—of Highcroft Farm in all the glory of a summer day. There was the old house itself; there the giant ash in its new green suit; there the pink and white of the orchard, the delicate reds and blues and yellows of the garden; there the high roofs and gables of the farm buildings; there the old dove-cote with the pigeons clustered about it; and in the background the great tower of the old church and the high elms of the vicar's park. This was a picture indeed!

My grandmother, whose sight was remarkably good, was so taken by this masterpiece that she insisted on its remaining on the three chairs at her side

until she retired to her own room. Every now and then, during the progress of high tea, she would announce that she had recognised some new feature. Now it was the Victoria plum-tree which stood in one corner of the orchard ; now the lilac which overhung the garden gate ; now the pump which was set against the wall of the fold. Then in one of the figures which broke up the picture she was sure that she recognised old Wraby, and she finally announced her opinion that taking it all together the photographer from Sicaster could not have done it with more faithfulness and reality. The only criticism she could pass upon it was that she thought Richard might have improved it by putting in a family group on the lawn, arranged on a semicircle of chairs, with herself in the middle.

Next day Uncle Richard, assisted by Brewster, the carpenter, plugged the centre wall of the big parlour and hung the picture in an excellent light. Uncle Benjamin arrived just as this task had been accomplished, and was so struck with the excellence of his brother's performance that he immediately put me into his trap—I was as good a whip as himself—and sent me off to Sicaster to fetch his wife. Now, I had no entralling desire to have a three miles drive *tête-à-tête* with Mrs. Martha Harrington, so I asked if Sylvia might go with me. I believe Uncle Benjamin would have assented to any request I made just then, and so Sylvia and I were presently bowling along in fine style behind the mare, who apparently bore me no grudge, and behaved herself rather better than usual, considering that she only shied twice, and both times with a fair amount of provocation.

If Uncle Benjamin was gracious Aunt Martha was almost gushing. She insisted that we should get out

of the trap and go in for wine and cake, and she made one of the brewery men look after the mare during our absence. We had cowslip wine and sponge cake while she prepared herself for the drive. All the way to Wintersleave she was as affable as if Sylvia and myself had been Lord and Lady Normancaster, and when the mare shied in going round Linthrop Green corner she refrained from informing me—as I am sure she would have done in any other circumstances—that it was I who had taught her all her wickednesses.

I was not present during Mrs. Benjamin's inspection of the picture, but Sylvia told me afterwards that she was very loud in her praises of it, and that she reminded her in some ways of the fine ladies who came to Uncle Richard's studio and drank tea and looked at his pictures on the Sunday before they were sent to the Royal Academy. She also said that she gave Uncle Richard a good hint to the effect that as Benjamin was building a new house it would be a brotherly action on his—Richard's—part to paint half-a-dozen pictures, corresponding in size to that of Highcroft Farm, to hang on the walls of the dining-room. Uncle Richard, said Sylvia, had replied to this naïve suggestion with a good-natured joke, and had then added seriously that he had no doubt he could put his hands on something that his sister-in-law would like for her drawing-room. Mrs. Benjamin drove away with her lord and master in a very good humour, and instead of Uncle Benjamin appointing me some task for the afternoon, as he generally did, he was gracious enough to say that with the exception of counting the sheep in the Low Meadows there was nothing that I need do that day.

It was very clear that Uncle Richard's return had wrought a very pleasant change in our family, and before they had been with us a week I began to wonder what it would be like when he and Sylvia had left us. That Uncle Richard was a most adaptable man and at home in any company was soon made evident to me. He would read chapters out of the Bible to his mother; argue theological points with Aunt Frances (rarely to her satisfaction, I am afraid); retail all the fashionable news of London to Aunt Caroline, and give me good advice as to what I should read. Before he had been at home many days he seemed to have conquered the whole parish. Sometimes he was found smoking his pipe with old Wraby in the potato-boiling house; sometimes he lounged with the labourers in the stable-door, telling them stories which produced loud guffaws of laughter; sometimes I came across him sitting on a heap of stones by the roadside, chatting to old David the road-mender. There was scarcely a cottage in the place to which he did not pay a visit, and the old men and women—to whom he gave packets of snuff, papers of tobacco, and half-pounds of tea—idolised him and said, one and all, that they had always known he would turn out a great man. Even the farmers, hearing of his prosperity, were as surlily cordial to him as men can be who believe with all their hearts that what is born on the land should live and die on the land; and when they found that he was by no means averse to joining them in the bar-parlour of the Crown and Cushion over a pipe and a glass, and gave himself no airs because he was now a famous London artist, they became quite friendly, and declared that if Dick Harrington had chosen a queer

way of making a living, he was still a good fellow at heart.

Uncle Richard and Sylvia had arrived at Winters-leave on a Monday; as the end of the week drew near I observed Aunt Caroline to be wearing an expression of anxiety. At last she confided her trouble to me. Sunday was drawing near, and she was quite certain that nothing in the world would induce Uncle Richard to attend a place of worship. She had learnt from Sylvia that he never went to church or chapel in London unless it was to hear some very great preacher who was just then putting forward some new doctrine or theory, and that on these occasions he always became either so wildly excited or so furiously indignant that he would give up painting and spend all his time in haranguing his friends on the preacher's merits or demerits—generally the latter—until everybody was sick of him. There had always been a lot of trouble with him about religion, said Aunt Caroline, ever since he was a boy. He had once got up in the village chapel and contradicted no less a personage than the superintendent minister on a point of Scripture, and moreover had pulled out a Bible, and proved beyond doubt that the minister was wrong and he right—a crime which could never be forgotten even if it was forgiven, of which there was much doubt. Then, after a friendship with a High Church curate in a neighbouring village, he had got across with the Low Church vicar of his own parish, and had offered to prove to him in public debate that certain doctrines which were commonly held to be Popish were in strict accordance with the canons of the Church of England. Later, he had talked of going into a monastery, and had shown a

preference for the Trappist order. Still later he declared for Buddhism, and was loud in the praises of that ancient faith at the time of his departure from home. What he was now, or what he believed in, Aunt Caroline did not know ; but she felt quite sure that they would never get him to either church or chapel on Sunday, and even if they did, she knew that it was a million to one that he would take exception to something, and fume and fret about it for the rest of his stay at Wintersleave.

However, poor Aunt Caroline's fears—fully shared in by Aunt Frances, who had a very genuine concern for the spiritual welfare of all about her—were suddenly set at rest by an announcement made by Uncle Richard himself as we sat at tea on Friday afternoon. It appeared that he had had two motives in coming down to Yorkshire. One was a desire to see his mother, his sisters—he somehow omitted Uncle Benjamin's name, and I don't think when he said sisters that he meant to include Mrs. Winterbee—and the old place ; the other was to execute a set of twelve drawings in water-colour of the most picturesque places in Yorkshire, for which Lord Saxonstowe had given him a very handsome commission. He intended, he said, to set out on an expedition round these twelve places on the morrow. Then he added, in the manner of the man who is in the habit of doing just what he pleases, that it was his intention to take Sylvia and me with him.

I could not believe my ears. I had to pinch my leg to make sure that I was not dreaming. Take me with him ? Me ? Travelling ? It must be a dream, a wild, mad dream. Pinch or no pinch, I should presently wake and find myself . . . and

then, how miserable I should be to know that such a beautiful dream was—only a dream.

Remember, I had never been anywhere. I had travelled on the railway three times—once, when I journeyed with my aunts to Wintersleave, once when I was taken to school, once when I turned my back on school. Uncle Benjamin had once taken me to Cornchester—twelve miles away—so that I might drive home some sheep which he bought at the fair. I had once or twice made excursions to neighbouring villages to look at some old church or house, and once I had walked along the Great North Road to a point from which it was said that you could see the towers of York Minster in one direction, and those of Lincoln in the other, though I failed to see either, the day being hazy; but of all else of my native county I was as ignorant as I was of the Arctic Regions. My world up to then had lain within the parish boundaries; to go beyond them, to see places twenty, forty, perhaps fifty miles away was unbelievable!

I woke to find that it was to be believed in, after all.

“To-morrow morning!” my Aunt Frances was saying. “Why, Richard, my dear, there would be no time to pack the children’s things!”

Sylvia smiled; Uncle Richard uttered a groan.

“Things!” he said. “What things do they want, or, rather, what does the boy want? Sylvia and I know what we want, don’t we, child? We carry all we want on our backs, in knapsacks, and I’ve got a spare one that I can lend Gerard. Put into it a couple of flannel shirts, all his spare socks, a supply of pocket-handkerchiefs, a comb, and a tooth-brush, and there you are! That’s all I carry, anyway.”

"Well, I daresay we might manage that," replied Aunt Frances. "But supposing you get caught in a sudden rainstorm and have no dry clothes to change into?"

"The girl and myself," said Uncle Richard, "have waterproofs, and we never think of such things as either rain, hail, snow, or wind. If the boy hasn't got a waterproof, I will buy one for him at the first shop we come across. There now, it's all settled, and we'll be off at eight o'clock to-morrow morning. Mind you're up early, boy."

Up early! As if I had the slightest desire for bed that night or the least prospect of going to sleep when I got there! I was so excited that I could not keep still, and I plied Sylvia with a thousand questions as to what was going to happen. Where were we going? How should we get there? Should we walk all the way? Where should we sleep at night? When she told me that judging from previous experiences of hers we should go wherever Uncle Richard's fancy prompted him to go, that we should sometimes drive, sometimes ride, sometimes walk, sometimes journey by train—these methods of locomotion depending on his mood and our situation—that we should stay sometimes in big hotels, sometimes in wayside inns, sometimes in lonely farmsteads or cottages, and sometimes, possibly, be hard put to it to find beds at all—in short, that we were going off on as irresponsible and informal a journey as the heart of adventurous youth could desire—why, then, it seemed to me that the night which must needs elapse before our departure would never pass. To Sylvia, my excitement was a thing of wonder—although she was two years younger than

myself she was a travelled woman, and had seen such far-off places as Devonshire, Scotland, and Paris.

I certainly did not sleep that night, and I was up and dressed and downstairs before five o'clock. At seven, Uncle Richard appeared in his character of leader of the expedition. He was arrayed in another knickerbocker suit, which appeared to be of considerable antiquity—I heard him tell Aunt Caroline that it had been cleaned and done up a dozen times, and would last him out yet, and his stockings and tie were of homely hues. He showed me how to pack my knapsack, and how to wear it so that the weight was least felt. He himself carried quite a load on his back—a small knapsack with his personal belongings, whereof large packages of tobacco formed no inconsiderable part; a larger one, filled with sketch-books and painting materials; an easel which folded up into quite a small compass; a large white umbrella, almost as big as a small bell tent, which was so contrived that it could be used as a walking stick and a folding stool. He also had a pocket filter, which was enclosed in a drinking cup; a small spirit lamp which was a marvel of compactness, and a silver flask of considerable dimensions, which he filled with my grandmother's best whisky and put away in an inside pocket. Aunt Frances, who had watched all these preparations with great interest, said it was quite evident that Uncle Richard was an old campaigner, and she only hoped that he might not get too tired by carrying such a load. She also added that, next day being Sunday, he would of course be able to take a rest and go to a place of worship. To this Uncle Richard replied drily that he hoped to spend Sunday in York, and that he had no doubt there

would be plenty of room to spare in the Minster for as many miserable sinners as chose to go there.

I had small appetite for breakfast that morning, but Uncle Richard and Sylvia ate as heartily as if they were never going to see food and drink again. As for me, I fidgeted about, wanting to be off, and half fearing that Uncle Benjamin might descend upon us and put a veto on my inclusion in the party. I was like a dog that has been released from its chain and is all impatient to breast the wind and scour the plain, and I wondered whenever Uncle Richard was going to stop eating cold beef, or how many more eggs Sylvia meant to consume. Two hours later I wished, honestly enough, that the cold beef and the eggs were handy.

At last we were off, and as we passed out of the orchard into the croft I saw to my astonishment that the clock in the church-tower indicated the exact hour of eight—the last half-hour had seemed to me like an entire forenoon. At the head of the croft I turned and looked back on the farmstead: it was already a far-off thing; the unknown Future seemed nearer.

After crossing two or three fields at the back of the croft we came out upon the Great North Road. It then appeared that we were not going to walk very much that day, for awaiting us at the stile was a horse and trap, with ample accommodation for ourselves and our baggage, and for a boy who was to bring the trap back from York, twenty-three miles away. And in a few minutes we were safely packed into it, Uncle Richard and the boy in front, and Sylvia and I behind, and bowling away along the wide road without a care in the world.

What a drive that was, and what a lot Sylvia and I had learnt before we came to the end of it! I believe that Uncle Richard knew the history of every village we passed through. He showed us the site of William the Conqueror's camp on the banks of the Aire near Ferrybridge; he showed us the old inn in Ferrybridge itself where Sir Walter Scott used to stop on his journeys between Edinburgh and London. Farther along the road he took us round the old church at Sherburn, built on the site of an ancient palace of the Archbishops of York; we climbed the tower and stood on its leaden roof; Edward IV. climbed that tower the day before the Battle of Towton. Then we went on to Towton battlefield and saw the famous red and white roses which have grown there ever since Yorkist and Lancastrian blood mingled round the undulating meadows which rise about the little village of Saxton, in whose churchyard half the flower of England's nobility found sepulchre after that awful carnage. Thence, the desire to show us as many historic places as he could rising irrepressible within him, Uncle Richard deviated from the highroad and took us through leafy, rose-scented lanes to Cawood, where Cardinal Wolsey kept his last great state, and then to Nun Appleton, once the home of the greatest of the Fairfaxes. We saw more places of interest that day than I had deemed it possible to see in a week—and yet we were in York long before the midsummer sunset fell over the great Minster, the ancient walls, the silent memorials of the old Roman dominion and of the grim Norman rule.

We spent four days in York, lodging at the Black Swan in Coney Street, an old-world hostelry of a very

grave and sober sort. There was an old waiter there of such dignity and fine manners that it would not have surprised me if I had been informed that he was the Archbishop. But what was there in York that was not surprising? During our stay there Sylvia and I were left much to ourselves—Uncle Richard, on the night of our arrival, discovered a view of the Minster which he had never noticed before, and he set to work on it next morning with feverish energy. While he worked—and he worked almost from sunrise to sunset—Sylvia and I explored the city. Let those who love that queen of English towns imagine our delight!

But what delight was there, could there be, that we did not get out of this excursion? We went on from York to Helmsley and saw Rievaulx Abbey and Laurence Sterne's little house at Coxwold; thence by way of Pickering and through the beautiful dales beyond it to Whitby, full of memories of Caedmon and St. Hilda; thence through Guisborough and Stokesley to Richmond, most picturesque of all Yorkshire towns; still onward by Rokeby and Greta Bridge to Barnard Castle, where at the King's Head we drank old ale in honour of Charles Dickens and in memory of Newman Noggs. Thence we turned southward by Wensleydale and Ripon and Knaresborough and Bolton Priory, and at last, after crossing Marston Moor on our way from Boroughbridge, reached York again, and so went home to Highcroft Farm. We had been away exactly five weeks.

That was my wander-year. I have seen wide stretches of the world since then, but till I die my heart will be true as steel to the loveliness and wonder of the county of my birth.

CHAPTER VI.

A FAMILY GATHERING.

IT was not an easy or a very welcome thing to have to settle down to farm work again after those glorious weeks of wandering amongst old churches, ancient castles, and picturesque towns ; but, as Uncle Richard often impressed upon me, all work is good, and I had had a holiday as grand as it was unexpected. Moreover, there was just then a great deal to be done on the farm—we were in the middle of the hay-harvest, and Uncle Benjamin, who had a notion that the weather would not keep up for long, was putting every effort forward to get the hay in while the sun shone. I turned out into the fields on the morning which followed our return, and after breakfast Sylvia joined me. I found her a light hay-fork and showed her how to turn the swathes of hay, and she worked at my side all the forenoon. We had become good friends, she and I, during our pilgrimage with Uncle Richard. There were points in common between us—we were both somewhat old-fashioned, grave-notioned young folk ; we had both seen rather more of the sober side of life than of the lighter side ; and we had lived in worlds and dreams into which most children of our age do not wander. We used to talk in those days of what we would do : it was my ambition to write a great poem and a great history ; it was hers to become a great actress. Even then we were so very serious about these dreams of ours that we

spoke of them with an excess of gravity and earnestness. As I remember her at that time, she was grave beyond her years, and to older people there may have been something amusing—and perhaps pathetic—in the way in which she looked forward to her work as if it had been a pre-ordained thing that she should become a second Siddons.

But there was a further bond of sympathy between Sylvia and myself in the fact that we were both orphans. She knew that her father had been a painter, and was an old friend of Uncle Richard, but she knew little more. She thought that he had not been a very well known painter—Uncle Richard, she said, always said on the rare occasions on which he mentioned him, that he had died too young to have a chance. Of her mother, Sylvia remembered very little, either; I gathered from the little she did remember that Mrs. Leighton had known a great deal of trouble, as my mother had. Sylvia could not remember any time when she had not lived with Uncle Richard—her first recollections were of him. Uncle Richard, herself, and an old servant, Margaret Wood, made up their household. Some day, Sylvia said, I should pay a visit to them, and she would show me round London. But just then that delightful prospect seemed a long way off.

Uncle Richard had announced on his return from our excursion that he must go back to London very soon, and immediately on hearing this my grandmother made known her pleasure that she intended to have an entire gathering of the family before her younger son's departure. She was now getting a very old woman, she said, and could not expect to live very much longer, and as London was such a long way off

and it cost a great deal of money to travel from there, whereby Richard could not be expected to make the journey often, she wished now that he was here that she should have the opportunity of seeing all her children together for the last time. And she gave orders to Aunt Frances and Aunt Caroline to write to the Benjamin Harringtons and to the Winterbees, making known her wishes, and desiring their presence on a certain day, when they were to be entertained to dinner and tea.

I saw very well that neither Aunt Frances nor Aunt Caroline had any particular relish for this family gathering. When it was mentioned to Uncle Richard, he went through the pipe-wagging movement for quite a period, and then observed to Aunt Caroline that we were all called upon to weather the storms of life at some time or another, and that it was a fine thing to have a philosophic mind. Aunt Caroline, however, was not so easily reconciled to possible trouble, and she wrote out the letters of invitation with a cloud on her usually smiling face.

The real reason for this anxiety on the part of my two aunts lay in their doubt as to what particular mood their sister, Mrs. Winterbee, would assume on the appointed day. My Aunt Sophia was a woman of character. She was as kind-hearted a soul as ever lived, and though she never let a day pass without telling somebody that charity should begin at home, and that one should cherish justice rather than generosity, she spent more on others than she ever spent on herself, and did a great deal of good in a quiet way. Also she was the best of wives to Mr. William Winterbee, and had helped him, year in and year out, to accumulate the fortune which that worthy

gentleman was steadily making. She was the sort of woman who could make five shillings go further than some women would make ten go, and she believed in saving every penny, and in paying twenty shillings in the pound, and on the nail. In short, she was the very model of a clever, managing, frugal wife, and if she did take good care that Mr. Winterbee stuck to business like a leech, she was just as careful that he was supplied with every comfort in his own house. But Aunt Sophia had a tongue. She also had very strong prejudices. Moreover, she had a sad trick of speaking her mind—very forcibly. If she did not approve of anything, she told the world so as quickly and as vehemently as possible. She usually said that the non-approval was the joint property of Mr. Winterbee and herself. I do not believe that Mr. Winterbee had any fixed ideas on these things, but he could always shake his head, say “Hum—hah—just so!” and look very wise when his name was introduced with all the weight of a Papal Bull. Aunt Sophia’s mighty, if ungrammatical, dictum, “Me and William don’t approve” was as grand in its way as Wolsey’s “Ego et Rex meus.”

“ You see, Gerard, dear,” said Aunt Caroline to me on the day previous to the family gathering, “ your Aunt Sophia and Uncle Richard don’t get on very well together—they never did. And you know what she is like if she isn’t pleased. And I’m afraid, very much afraid, that she’ll be so displeased at finding poor little Sylvia here.”

I stared at Aunt Caroline in amazement.

“ Why, Aunt Carrie? ” I inquired.

Aunt Caroline made cabalistic signs on her blotter—a sure sign, I knew, that she was wondering

whether it might not be well to entrust me with her confidence. We were alone in the little parlour; she decided to speak.

"The truth is, Gerard, dear," she said, speaking after the slow, halting fashion of persons who are not quite sure of their ground, "the truth is—you see, there is some mystery about Sylvia and her mother, and—well, and about your Uncle Richard. And I think—and your Aunt Frances agrees with me—that as your Aunt Sophia is sure to say something in your presence about this—this mystery, you ought to be told, so that—that you may not misunderstand anything she says. You know how—how outspoken your Aunt Sophia is, Gerard."

"Yes, indeed, Aunt Carrie," I responded feelingly, for I had been "talked to" by Mrs. Winterbee more than once. "I know very well. But what is the mystery?"

"It is this, Gerard," replied Aunt Caroline, dropping her voice and glancing fearfully at the door of the little parlour. "Nobody knows who Sylvia is, or who her mother really was. And—it seems a dreadful thing to say—your Aunt Sophia and Mr. Winterbee, and Benjamin and his wife, believe that Sylvia is really your Uncle Richard's daughter—and—and that he was not married to her mother."

My Aunt Caroline was very much confused, and blushed a great deal as she made this statement, and I myself suddenly felt some sort of a thrill of shame or indignation or something indefinable swell through me.

"I don't believe it, Aunt Carrie!" I made haste to say. "I—I don't think that could be true. Do you?"

"I hope it is not true, my dear," replied Aunt Caroline," and your Aunt Frances hopes so, too—and we should be very sorry to know that it was; but there is only one person who could assure us of the truth, and that is Richard himself, and nothing in the world would induce him to say a word that he did not want to say. You know, Gerard, Richard was always a law to himself. He would never be checked or controlled, and he never cared for anybody or for any law—he always did what he liked, and told other people just as much as it pleased him to tell. He says that Sylvia's mother was the widow of a dead friend of his, but who that friend was, and how Richard came to attach himself so closely to the widow and her child nobody knows."

"But why shouldn't that be the real truth?" I inquired.

Aunt Caroline shook her head.

"This is a very suspicious and censorious world, Gerard," she said, sighing a little. "And it is such a sad thing that even good people seem to be as suspicious as anybody else. Now there is your Aunt Sophia—you know what a good and kind woman she is, but I'm afraid she's more suspicious than she ought to be. And in the past she has said some hard things of Richard. You see, it was Mr. Winterbee who found this out, years ago."

"Found out what?" I asked.

"When Richard first went to London," replied Aunt Caroline, "we knew where he was, and he used to correspond with us. Then suddenly all correspondence ceased, and for some time we heard nothing. He had left the house in which he lived, and no one knew where he had gone. He had belonged to a

famous sketching club—they had missed him altogether from that. Indeed, we could get no news of him in London. Then Mr. Winterbee happened to be in London one day, and he met Richard in Oxford Street. Richard greeted him quite unconcernedly, made some off-hand reply to Mr. Winterbee's questions about his silence, and asked Mr. Winterbee to come and see his new house and study. He showed him over these, and told him that the widow of a dead friend of his was keeping house for him. Later, Mr. Winterbee called on him again with your Aunt Sophia, and that time they found Richard and Mrs. Leighton and little Sylvia, who was then nothing but a baby, together in Richard's studio. Mrs. Leighton was a woman of great beauty—wonderful, I suppose—and your Aunt Sophia became suspicious. She soon found that the entire establishment consisted of Mrs. Leighton, Sylvia, Uncle Richard, and an old servant—and at a convenient opportunity she gave Richard what she calls a piece of her mind. Richard was very angry, and they quarrelled—I don't think they have ever spoken to each other since. And so you see, Gerard, your Aunt Frances and I are naturally anxious about the result of their present meeting. You know, Aunt Sophia is—well, she is inquisitive. She wanted to know a lot about Uncle Richard's housekeeper—who her husband was, when he died, what he died of, when and where Sylvia was born, and why Richard should saddle himself with another man's family, and her suspicions were just as keen even when the poor woman died. And you know, Gerard, your Uncle Richard is the last man in the world to bear questioning about himself—it makes him so impatient and furious. I believe," concluded

Aunt Caroline, "I believe he actually told your Aunt Sophia to go to—to the Bad Place!"

"Won't it upset grandmother if Aunt Sophia and Uncle Richard quarrel?" I asked. "It might make her heart very bad again."

Aunt Caroline shook her head.

"They won't do that in her presence," she said confidently. "No, your grandmother never knew anything about—about Mrs. Leighton; she was never told. It is only the rest of us who know. But you know, Gerard, how very uncomfortable Aunt Sophia can make things for everybody, if she—well, if she is in one of her tempers."

I did know that, quite well. And I began to reflect upon ways and means of placating Aunt Sophia immediately upon her arrival. A brilliant idea occurred to me.

"Aunt Carrie," I said, "I know what might make Aunt Sophia a bit—well, a bit nicer to-morrow. You know she always has a little drop of whisky after she gets here, because travelling in the train from Kingsport makes her breathing bad. Couldn't you tell Aunt Frances to give it to her as soon as she gets into the house and before she sees Uncle Richard?—I've noticed that she's always much more gracious after she's had it."

Aunt Caroline laughed.

"Fie, Gerard!" she said. "Your Aunt Sophia only takes a little spirit because, like her poor mother, she has a weak heart. However, we shall see what will happen to-morrow. It's a strange thing that she and Richard should be the very opposite of each other!"

I was all impatient for the morrow to come, and

I am afraid that I was boy enough to be not averse to something in the way of a scene—I certainly had an eye for theatrical effect. And from long previous experience I knew that to witness some scenes in which Aunt Sophia cut a principal figure was to see pure comedy of the highest degree.

A family gathering in those days was an event. My two aunts and the maids, assisted by a woman out of the village, had been preparing for this for some days before it came off. Weddings, funerals, christenings, feasts, and reunions of relations and friends were always celebrated by much eating and drinking. There was always a great deal of tiresome ceremonial about them—everybody's manners were as formal and polite as if they had been going to Court. One's best clothes—black broadcloth for the men, and stiff crackling silk for the women—were always worn. The assembled company, for at least a doleful hour before dinner—the great event of the day—was accustomed to sit in state in the drawing-room and to indulge in polite conversation. It was a sore trial to young folk of a mercurial disposition, and provocative of much bad temper from restless children.

The Winterbees arrived early, driving over from a railway station some distance away in a hired fly. My Aunt Sophia was immediately hurried off upstairs by Aunt Frances and Aunt Caroline, and for some time Mr. Winterbee was left to me, to Sylvia, and to Uncle Richard. I was somewhat surprised to find that Mr. Winterbee and Uncle Richard seemed to get on very well together—they had plenty to talk about, and were quite amiable. To Sylvia Mr. Winterbee was evidently a source of amusement. He had some

curious tricks of manner which had stuck to him all his life and could not be got rid of—he was a middle-aged bachelor when he married Aunt Sophia—and to anyone who saw them for the first time they must have seemed almost grotesque. Thus he had a perpetual twitch of his left eye, accompanied by a spasmodic movement of his mouth; he invariably repeated whatever he said two or three times, after the fashion of George the Third, and he wound up every question—and he was full of questions—with a discharge of, “Eh-eh-eh-eh—eh, eh?” which transformed him into a sort of machine-gun. Then he had two other tricks which produced terrifying effects upon people who had never seen them before. One was to balance himself on his heels, to throw out his arms with a sudden jerking movement which shot his highly glazed, gold-studded cuffs far over his wrists, and then, drawing in his elbows to his waist in equally abrupt fashion, to flap his arms violently, penguin-fashion, for several minutes, at the same time blowing out his cheeks and making a loud puffing noise with his lips. The other was to suddenly pull out his fine cambric handkerchief, to execute a series of slaps and dashes with it upon his gaitered boots, and then to crack it in the air as a coachman cracks his whip, winding up the entire performance with a final pistol-shot of sound that made everybody jump. As these tricks were done without the slightest reason, and with no warning that Mr. Winterbee was about to perform them, their effect on people who had never seen them before was surprising, and I was not astonished when Sylvia, after a patient study of my Aunt Sophia’s husband, confided to me her opinion that he was a very funny man.

I was all agog for the appearance of Aunt Sophia. And I was sufficiently acquainted with her moods to see as soon as she entered the drawing-room that she was in a lofty spirit in which Christian virtue was mingled with Christian resignation to wickedness, lightness, and whatever there was that she and Mr. Winterbee did not approve of. I knew her—it was not her day for speaking her mind to anyone. She was going to suggest it instead.

"And how are you, Richard?" inquired Aunt Sophia, shaking hands in the latest fashionable style with her brother. "Quite well, I hope?"

"I am quite well, thank you, Sophia," answered Uncle Richard. "I am glad to see you looking so well—as young as ever."

Mrs. Winterbee sank into an easy chair, sighed, sniffed, and having refreshed herself by smelling at the contents of a gold-mounted vinaigrette, she arranged her silks and her laces and proceeded to inspect the room and its contents through a gold lorgnette which she fixed on the bridge of her high nose—all the Harringtons had high noses, and were as proud of them as they were of their good figures and small hands and feet. Her gaze fell on Sylvia. No one could be more affectedly patronising and condescending than Mrs. Winterbee. She consortied with the ladies of aldermen and sheriffs at Kingsport, and shone with their reflected glory. And she spoke to Sylvia as from a throne of state.

"Oh, and that's the little girl, is it?" said Mrs. Winterbee. "Come here, my dear, and let me look at you. H'm!—you're quite tall for your age—thirteen, aren't you? Dear me! You never knew your papa or your mamma, eh, my dear?"

"No; I remember nothing of my father, and scarcely anything of my mother, Mrs. Winterbee," replied Sylvia.

Mrs. Winterbee sighed deeply.

"It must be a serious dispensation to be left all alone in the world," she said. "Yet you must have relatives somewhere, my dear!"

Sylvia shook her head. Her eyes were fastened on Mrs. Winterbee's numerous chains, rings, and brooches.

"No doubt you sometimes go to visit your grandparents?" said Mrs. Winterbee, as if such relations in the flesh must needs belong to everybody at every period. "Or your aunts and uncles—and, of course, your cousins. You'll have cousins about your own age, no doubt?"

Sylvia looked wonderingly at her, and then at Uncle Richard.

"I haven't any relations anywhere, have I, Dick?" she asked.

"Never mind about relations," said Uncle Richard hastily. "Don't bother the child, Sophia."

Mrs. Winterbee favoured us with her most resigned sigh. She looked as a highly respectable Roman matron must have looked if such a one was ever required to resign herself against her will and taste.

"Oh, it's of no consequence to me," she said. "I have enough to occupy my time without poking and prying into other people's affairs. But I never had any love of mysteries, and I don't approve of little girls calling grown-up gentlemen by their nick-names. Mr. Winterbee and me are very particular about the way in which young people should conduct themselves

—very particular. What is it your intention to do, child?"

"Do?" repeated Sylvia.

"Do to earn your living," said Mrs. Winterbee, illuminatively.

"I mean to be an actress—a great actress," answered Sylvia.

Mrs. Winterbee sniffed, and applied herself to her vinaigrette.

"My mother was an actress once," continued Sylvia.

Mrs. Winterbee bowed her head in complete acquiescence.

"I can quite believe it, child," she said. "Well, of course, everybody to their own tastes, but I wouldn't choose any such low calling as the theatre for a child of mine if I had one. Mr. Winterbee and myself don't approve of the theatre, and we don't allow any of the young men in our shop to visit it."

"I think I once saw Mr. and Mrs. Winterbee coming out of the Opera in Paris, some years ago, Sophia," said Uncle Richard, with a dry laugh.

"Theatre-going on the Continent, Richard, and theatre-going at home are two different matters," answered Mrs. Winterbee. "When you're in Rome you must do as the Romans do. The people who attend the operatic performances in Paris are the *élite* of the city, not a lot of low, orange-sucking, down-at-heel nobodies such as you see outside the theatres in this country."

This view of the matter seemed to occasion Uncle Richard much amusement and Sylvia great surprise, and before one had finished roaring with laughter and the other had ceased from staring at Mrs. Winterbee

with evident astonishment, Mr. Winterbee announced his intention of looking round the farmstead, and invited me to go with him.

"Strong-opinioned woman, your Aunt Sophia, Gerard," said he when we got out into the sunlight. "Strong-opinioned woman. Clever woman, sir; clever woman. Has her own ideas. Generally right, Gerard; gen-er-al-ly right, sir. Quite different to her brother Richard—quite different. Different as fine linen from kitchen towelling. Yes—yes—yes—yes! Strange fellow, your Uncle Richard; stra-a-a-a-nge fellow. Umph!"

Then he went through one of the penguin performances, quite unconsciously, and having remarked that it was a glorious morning, demanded to be shown all the live stock. I believe he made a mental calculation of its value, for to him money and money's worth were the only things of any real interest.

The Benjamin Harrington family had already arrived when Mr. Winterbee and I returned to the house, and for nearly an hour afterwards everybody under my grandmother's roof (except the mistress herself, who, for her health's sake, was going to stay quietly in her own room until dinner was ready) was assembled in the drawing-room. I was very much astonished to perceive that during our absence in the farmstead Uncle Richard had discarded his Highland plaid knickerbocker suit, his scarlet tie, and his flaming stockings for a dark morning suit, which in spite of my inexperienced eye for such things, I felt sure had been fashioned by some great London tailor. He had also run a comb through his mane of wild hair, and had trimmed his beard a little, and I considered him a very distinguished-looking man.

Mrs. Winterbee and Mrs. Martha Harrington provided much fashionable conversation—for themselves—during this period of waiting. They talked of grand doings in Sicaster and in Kingsport, and I learnt—having a trick of keeping my ears open on all occasions—that while Mr. Winterbee himself invariably declined all connection with municipal honours, his partner, Mr. Dickinson, was not so retiring, and after several years' service on the town council was about to be rewarded with the mayoralty. This was regarded, I think, by Mrs. Winterbee as balancing the undoubted fact that Mrs. Benjamin Harrington's father, a retired grocer, was at that moment Mayor of Sicaster—as she did not fail to let everybody know.

The three gentlemen discussed politics during this stage of the proceedings, and as Sylvia was amusing Tom and Bertha Harrington with descriptions of London—they listening open-mouthed, and with the half-scepticism which they inherited from their father and mother, who, having no imagination themselves, never believed one-half of what was told them—I hung near them listening to their wisdom, learning in the end that Uncle Richard was a violent Radical, that Mr. Winterbee valued his own opinion above that of the *Times* newspaper, and that Uncle Benjamin was inclined to side with whichever party happened to be in power, and particularly anxious not to contradict either his brother or his brother-in-law.

As for my Aunts Frances and Caroline, they took little part in any conversation, and were perpetually running away into the kitchen or the big parlour to see that everything was in a proper state of preparation. Eventually Aunt Frances left us altogether to

attend to my grandmother, and at last, when she was brought downstairs and installed in her chair at the head of the dining-table, we were all marshalled in, in precedence, and sat down to the feast.

They had massive ideas about food and drink in those days, and I have often wondered since how it is that appetites have changed so remarkably. I am sure we had roast beef and roast veal on the table that day, and I have recollections of roast ducks and boiled fowl too. That there was plum pudding I am certain, and no dinner there would have been complete without a dig into a ripe Stilton. In the fashion of those days even the children were given a glass of sound old port when the cloth had been drawn and the nuts and almonds and dried fruit put on the table. We all drank my grandmother's health, and she made us a little speech, reminding us that she was now a very old woman, and bidding every one of us, young and old, remember to serve the Lord, whom she praised publicly for all the blessings He had given her. She looked so marble-like and ethereal that day as she sat, very erect, outlined against the great black hood of her chair, that none of us would have been surprised if she had suddenly gone hence and finished her *Nunc Dimittis* in heaven.

We spent that afternoon in various ways—the women after their fashion; Uncle Benjamin and Uncle Richard over pipes and glasses, Mr. Winterbee in their company, but minus glass or pipe, for he could neither smoke nor drink; and we young people in the granary, where, at Sylvia's suggestion, we fitted up a mimic stage and acted charades. In order to do this with some effect we ransacked the old apple-chamber upstairs, and found such a collection of

ancient wearing apparel and old-world matters in the shape of rusty swords, pistols, fowling-pieces, saddles, and what not, that we might easily have set up shop as theatrical costumiers. We represented several historical scenes with great success, but it was the greatest mercy in the world that my head was not chopped off in that which depicted the execution of Charles the First, for Tom Harrington, as the man with the mask, grew so excited that he nearly carried out his part literally.

It was just after we sat down to tea that evening that a sudden termination came to a period which for me had been the happiest I had ever known. A man rode hurriedly up to the kitchen door and delivered a telegram. Telegrams were almost unheard of amongst us at that time—they had to be brought all the way from Sicaster, too. Of course, it was for Uncle Richard. He read it over at a glance, told Sylvia that she must immediately get ready to go back to town, found and consulted a time-table, and asked Uncle Benjamin if he could drive them to Sicaster station at once. All was scurry and bustle and hurried leave-taking. Before one could realise it, Uncle Richard and Sylvia had left us, as suddenly and unexpectedly as they had come to us. And it was in keeping with the Harrington reserve that none of us knew the nature of that urgent summons.

CHAPTER VII.

AGRICULTURE AND BOOKS.

AFTER the departure of our guests (the first we had had at Highcroft Farm since I had known it, with, of course, the exception of the Benjamin Harringtons and the Winterbees, who came and went as they pleased), life flowed into its old channels, and things became just as they had been before. Of the reason of Uncle Richard's sudden leave-taking I heard nothing at that time, nor, I think, did his mother or his sisters. I saw occasional letters in his handwriting, but never heard anything of their contents. Now and then I had a letter from Sylvia (the first letters I had ever had from anybody), but she never referred to Uncle Richard except to say that he sent his love and hoped I was reading all I could and leading an outdoor life. Nor did she say anything of her home surroundings—her letters were all about the books she read, the plays she saw, with criticisms upon both, which were as quaintly old-fashioned as they were shrewd and sometimes caustic. I used to read these letters over and over again, always with the same conclusion—that it must be a grand thing to live in London, to see book-shops, and picture galleries, and museums, and historic places, and to be able to go to the theatre and see Shakespeare's plays presented. I was not so sure that I should consider it proper to see anything else, for I had been taught from infancy that the theatre was a very wicked place, and I was

still under the spell of that early influence which sometimes clings about one too long. The atmosphere of Highcroft Farm, indeed, was not congenial to devotees of amusement or recreation. No Puritan household could have been managed on stricter lines than ours was. Nothing but the simplest of parlour games was allowed to children. Cards were regarded as abominations ; people who went to race-meetings as beyond all hope in this world or the next. Even the village feast was regarded as a sort of saturnalia which could well be dispensed with. I was enthusiastically devoted to cricket in those days, and was allowed to play in the croft with some other boys, but the mere notion of attending a cricket match was regarded by my grandmother and Aunt Frances with horror, such events being looked upon as affording good reason for the assembling together of low, idle fellows of the baser sort, toss-pots, poachers, ne'er-do-wells, and their like. Once, hearing of a match that was to take place in a village three miles off, I prevailed upon my Aunt Caroline to help me to go ; she smuggled me out of the house, and got me clear away, and covered my re-entrance on my return. But alack ! retribution followed—or, rather, waited upon me there and then. First of all, as I was watching the cricket and eating a large hunch of bread and jam which Aunt Caroline had forced upon me as I sped away, a wasp, attracted no doubt by my provender, settled upon my upper lip and stung me so badly that I had a mouth like a muffin for the rest of the day. Secondly, forgetting that the first principle of all cricket—whether you be player or spectator—is to keep your eye on the ball, and being at that time too much given to staring about me with

the laudable, but not always advisable, intention of learning all that I could, I suddenly got a crack on my forehead which stretched me out senseless and bleeding, and taught me the best lesson I ever learnt in my life—to concentrate one's attention on one thing at once. I therefore returned home in need of much assistance, and was obliged to set forth the plain truth. After being dealt with surgically, I was duly admonished by my grandmother and informed that the sting and the blow were direct judgments of the Lord upon me for going to such a wicked place. However, I did not reveal Aunt Caroline's share in the matter, and I rewarded her for it by giving her an imitation of the affected way in which the local champions had taken up their various positions in the field.

During the two months which followed the departure of Uncle Richard and Sylvia, however, there was small chance of anything but work for any of us. Harvest was coming on, and the harvest weeks in those days were the most anxious and the busiest weeks of the year. Wintersleave was a corn-growing parish then (now, alas! the greater part of its area is under grass), and when harvest came there was a general turning out to work of everybody in the village, with the exception of the bedridden and the babies. In these days of ingenious machinery you may go into a harvest field and find nothing there but a man, a boy, two horses, and an American self-binding reaping machine; in those days every field was full of life. Men and women, boys and girls, were hard at it under the August sun; young children guarded still younger children in the shade of the hedgerows. The village school closed its doors

during harvest time: while harvest-time lasted there was small attendance at church or chapel, and the Day of Rest gained a new and richer meaning. It was a time of continuous toil—up and at it with the sun; still at it long after the sun had gone down and the moon had risen. And no peace or rest ever seemed so sweet as that which came when the last field had been cleared, the last load safely garnered, and the calm and hush of autumn fell like a benediction over the land that had given up its treasure.

I used to wish that autumn that Sylvia would come back and see the orchard, before old Wraby and I despoiled it of its fruit. That is the pleasantest time of the year about a farm; the air is still heavily scented with the sweet smell of barley; the apples and plums and pears are red and russet and purple amidst the dying green of the orchards, and there is a strange golden glory over everything which is seen at no other time. Then, too, come the delights of nutting and blackberrying, and the beginnings of country life for autumn and winter—the crack of a gun amongst the stubble fields or in the coverts, the first sight of hounds and huntsmen going cub-hunting in the early mornings while the village fires were yet unlit.

That autumn and the winter which followed it were to me the pleasantest I had ever known. For some reason or other Uncle Benjamin was in a better temper with everybody than I ever remembered him to be—there was less grumbling about bad times, less complaints about work, less reminders that he was shamefully put upon by everybody. He seemed to be in the height of prosperity just then: the posts and rails episode grew dim, and vanished. The

house-building went on famously—I was allowed to inspect it on the day which saw the roof completed, and it seemed to me much too big for Uncle Benjamin and his small family. There were large ornamental grounds surrounding it, with coach-houses and stables and the like, and it presented a very imposing appearance altogether. Mrs. Benjamin Harrington, as it neared completion, swelled with dignity and importance: it was easy to see that she was looking forward to the day when she should set up her Lares and Penates within its walls, which were still, however, very odorous of lime and mortar.

It needed little perception on my part to see that my aunts were not quite so cock-a-whoop as Mrs. Benjamin was over this matter of the new house at Sicaster. My Aunt Frances was so devoted to Uncle Benjamin, and so much under his thumb, that she kept silent; Aunt Caroline never said much about it except to me; Aunt Sophia, after a certain stage, took no pains to show her disapproval. At first, when the project was announced to her, she said that she hoped Benjamin would build a house suited to his means and position; a little later she remarked upon the profound wisdom of the old saying that fools build houses for wise men to live in; still later, she declared that she had no patience with folks whose ideas were greater than their means. As this last remark was made in the presence of Mr. and Mrs. Benjamin Harrington, and in Mrs. Winterbee's best suggestive manner, it led to words.

"If there are some folks whose ideas are greater than their means," said Uncle Benjamin, with his usual sneer—"and I'm not saying there are, and I'm not saying there are not, for it's nothing to do with

me—there are some other folks who never know how to mind their own business, and I could put a name to them if I wanted to."

"Aye, and I could put a name to folk who want to run before they can walk!" retorted Mrs. Winterbee. "I'm neither blind nor deaf, my lad, don't you make any mistake."

"No; but I can tell you what you are," said Uncle Benjamin, who invariably grew personal when his temper was aroused. "You're a silly, meddlesome woman that's far too fond of giving her advice before it's asked, and you'd do a deal better if you bridled your sharp tongue a bit. And don't you talk to me like that, else you and me will fall out!"

"Aye, and I know who'd be the first to want to fall in again," said Mrs. Winterbee confidently. "William and me doesn't build grand houses with gazebos and turrets on them! We believe in putting our money aside for a rainy day, and not wasting it on gazebos. Gazebo on it, indeed! Mind you don't have a mortgage on it, my lad!"

Then Aunt Frances, hovering about like a dove who wants to make peace between a magpie and an owl, made various soothing cluckings, and the storm passed away. But Aunt Sophia, whenever the subject of the new house was mentioned, invariably hinted that we should see in time, and remarked that she and Mr. Winterbee did not approve of people launching out until they were sure of their ships—a deep saying with a nautical smack about it which I suppose she had derived from long acquaintance with Kingsport.

But I had other things to think about than Uncle Benjamin and his new house, and of a much

pleasanter nature. That autumn and winter my work consisted in taking charge of an experiment. Uncle Benjamin was induced by somebody or other to purchase a lot of Hereford cattle for feeding purposes. When they arrived from the South they were the sorriest-looking lot of beasts I ever set eyes on. I can see them now as they grouped themselves in one of our folds—they appeared to be nothing but horns, eyes, and bones. They were so thin that their horns seemed three times as long and their eyes twice as big as they really were. If ever animals asked for something to eat, they did. One of them, smaller than the rest, in whom hunger had produced an almost human expression, I christened Oliver Twist at once. Later on, all the others received names, all distinguished, conferred because of some characteristic or peculiarity in the recipient. But none of them ever came up to Oliver Twist in intelligence. He had made such a real acquaintance with hunger in his youth that he seemed to have been obliged to fall back upon his wits, and these he developed so astonishingly that he speedily found out how to do the best for himself, and in consequence put on flesh until he was as fat as he had been thin.

Uncle Benjamin, who possessed a certain sense of humour, said that these beasts reminded him of Napoleon Buonaparte's troops on the retreat from Moscow. He further remarked that however they were going to be made fat for market he could not think. In the end, after considering matters, he handed the whole lot over to me, placed one of the folds and certain stores at my disposal, gave me a lad of about my own age as assistant, and left me to the task of putting some flesh—not to dream of fat—on

the protruding ribs and in the cavernous hollows of this disconsolate crew. I entered upon the task with zest—it meant dealing with something alive. First of all, I made my charges warm and comfortable with plenty of good bedding. Instead of chaining them up I let them have the run of the fold, which was large, but well sheltered, and furnished with good, dry sheds. I prepared a dietary for them, and took care that they were fed at certain regular hours, to the exact moment. It was a generous diet—there was no other chance for them. They had swede and white turnips, linseed cake, cotton cake, malt, and plenty of good wheat straw. It was not long before they began to look as if there was still something to live for; not long before they commenced to put on flesh. Before Christmas they were entitled to be ranked as fat cattle; by the end of February people came from far and near to wonder at them. When they were finally taken off to market—and to death—I was sorry to lose them; they were much better companions than many human beings I have known. As for the boy who had helped me to look after them, he was inconsolable, and spent the whole day of their departure in the turnip shed, where, seated upon an upturned scuttle, he alternately indulged in sentimental reminiscences or in heavy floods of tears, utterly refusing to work or to be comforted until Aunt Caroline tempted him to resignation with a promise to make him an apple pasty for his supper.

This was my outdoor pursuit at that time. It left me a good deal of leisure for indoor work. I could always spare an hour in the morning, and another in the afternoon for my books. And then there were the long winter evenings, whereon, after the curtains

had been drawn and the lamps lighted, and the old house was quiet, one could give oneself up to reading or writing to one's heart's content. That autumn and winter, too, I was doing serious work, of which I was not a little proud. Mr. Langton, who had literary tastes of his own, and was fortunately able to indulge them, had been at work for some years on a certain historical treatise which was now nearly complete, and he was minded to have a clear copy of it made for the press. Although I hoed wheat and fed cattle, and had hands more like a blacksmith's than a student's, I was always noted for my penmanship, and Mr. Langton asked me to become his amanuensis. I copied his manuscript in my best style. When it was finished it struck me that his work would be greatly enhanced in value if the texts of the multitudinous references which he gave were extracted from their various sources and given in the shape of footnotes. He asked me if I thought I could undertake such a task ; I answered, Yes, if I had the books to refer to. There was no difficulty about that, so I was soon faced by a responsible, but very agreeable occupation. When it was finished, I undertook to make an index for the book, and though I had no previous knowledge of indexing, I soon worked out a simple plan which enabled me to perform this task also with ease and quickness.

It was towards the end of that winter, and just about the time that I entered upon my seventeenth year, that Wintersleave Manor House, which had been untenanted for some time, was let to new tenants. There was a curious feature in the history of this old house. Originally built in the twelfth century by a Norman baron, it was a well-known

historical fact that no member of any of the various families to which it had belonged at one time or another had ever lived in it—it had always been tenanted by strangers. We were all anxious to know who were now coming to reside in it: would they be young or old people?—would the Manor House remain the quiet place it always had been since I knew it (the last tenants, two old maiden ladies, rarely came outside its walls), or would it wake up and enliven the village? I confess that my own taste was for a sporting squire, who would show us something of the colour of life; they had such a one in a village not far off, who was fond of every sort of sport, from horse-racing to cock-fighting—he was a very wicked man, according to the Methodists, but he seemed interesting, and Wintersleave was a dull place. However, we were not destined to have any new face of this sort planted in our midst. The new tenants of the Manor House came so quietly that they were in residence before any of us were aware of it. One afternoon, chancing to pass the gates of the Manor, I saw an old lady and an old gentleman coming through them in company with several small dogs—spaniels, terriers, and the like—which, from their conduct, appeared to be as fond of their master and mistress as they were delighted to take the air in their company. I looked at the old lady and the old gentleman very attentively, for I had an intuitive feeling that they were the new tenants. I decided at first glance that they were the nicest people I had ever seen. The old lady was a little woman, the old gentleman was very tall. She wore a very old-fashioned poke bonnet, with what Aunt Caroline called a curtain to it; her shawl fell down in a V

behind, and was fastened by a great brooch in front; in her hands she carried a little parasol of green silk, with a top no bigger than a dinner plate. Her silk gown was spread out by a crinoline, and, being intended for walking out in, it afforded a full prospect of her slender ankles and small feet. She was a very dainty little lady altogether, and had the merriest face and the brightest eyes I had ever seen in a woman of her age. As for the old gentleman, he was attired almost as quaintly as the old lady. He wore a very high collar, with points sticking up about his chin; his neck was swathed in a voluminous black stock, which was held together by a diamond brooch; his frock-coat was very high in the collar, tight in the waist, and full in the skirts; his white nankeen trousers were strapped round his varnished boots. I had never seen a hat like the one he was then wearing—it was very high and tapering in the crown, and very broad and curly in the brim, and the latter was lined with green silk. They made a picturesque pair, these two, and there was a striking similarity between them in the fact that the old lady's hair, neatly parted in the middle, and arranged at the sides in festoons of curls, and the old gentleman's bushy whiskers and military moustache, were of the purest white—so white that they looked like finely spun wool. Seen at still closer quarters, their faces proved to bear the marks of very great age—they were so wrinkled and time-worn. But nowhere could one have found more evidence of sweet temper, of kindness of heart, of sunny, genial nature, than beneath the poke bonnet and the green-brimmed hat.

These were the new tenants of the Manor House. We soon knew them as Mr. and Mrs. Wickham. It

was understood that they came from the South of England. They lived very quietly, and their establishment was entirely devoid of ostentation ; indeed, their goings-abroad were done in either a one-horse brougham or in a pony-chaise which Mr. Wickham himself drove, or, more usually, on foot. Every day they went into the village to visit the sick, and Mr. Wickham was as ready to open his purse as he was to read a chapter out of the Bible. He and his wife soon knew everybody in the village. They were unanimously approved of as the kindest and simplest gentlefolk the place had ever known. The general opinion was that, free as they were with their money where charity was concerned, they were not wealthy, and belonged to the poor quality. No doubt the vicar knew, but no one else did, that Mr. Wickham was a member of her Majesty's Privy Council and an ex-Chancellor of the Exchequer.

It was in Mr. Langton's study that I first spoke to Mr. Wickham. One morning when I went there to leave some manuscript for the vicar I found him in the study, Mr. Langton being engaged elsewhere. He spoke to me kindly—he had the most genuinely kind and courteous manners of any man I ever met—and we had a long conversation before the vicar came to us. Next day Mr. Wickham came to me in the croft, where I was attending to an ailing sheep, and asked me if I had ever seen the books at the Manor House. I had never even been within the walls of the Manor House gardens and grounds, and told him so. Then he explained that a great part of the Manor House was let furnished, that most of the furniture was very old indeed, and that there were thousands upon thousands of old books there in the libraries

which had been accumulated between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries. It made me almost faint with emotion to think that these treasures had lain so near at hand and I had never known of them. But the great house of an English village in those days was as inaccessible as the inner chambers of a Norman keep in the days of feudalism—great folk kept themselves to themselves, and if they owned books and pictures and rare treasures of art, it was beyond their comprehension that such things could have any interest for people of lower degree.

My delight on receiving an invitation from Mr. Wickham to inspect the old library at the Manor House will be well imagined by all book-lovers. We appointed a day for my visit—it was fortunately one on which I had nothing to do for a whole afternoon. Mr. Wickham and I spent all that afternoon amongst folios, quartos, octavos, duodecimos, elzevirs, most of which, I am sure, had not been opened for long years. He was the most delightful of men to spend hours in a library with, for his mind was richly stored, and he gave his wealth of knowledge as freely and generously as God gives rain and sunshine. If I had known that he was a famous statesman with a long Parliamentary career of great honour behind him I might have been afraid to talk to him at first; but if he had been the King himself the lowliest of mortals could not have resisted his simple, manly kindness, nor the true greatness with which he put a youthful and bashful guest at his ease.

That was the first of many afternoons and evenings which I spent with Mr. Wickham. It was a delightful thing to wander about those old rooms. They had an atmosphere and an odour of long-dead days:

it was made up of the smell of ancient leather bindings, of dried rose-leaves, stored in great china bowls, of an indefinable something which seemed to come direct from the age of the powdered lords and ladies whose pictures filled the alcoves. Also there was an additional charm in the views from the embrasured window-places—views of a quaint garden gay with English flowers, and of a wide stretch of green lawn whereon peacocks spread their glories to the sun, and over which a cedar of Lebanon threw wide canopies of shadow.

This haunt of peace was destined to become my very own that spring and summer. It suddenly occurred to Mr. Wickham that since he had taken the Manor House on a seven years' lease he might as well have an accurate idea of its contents, and he was not only kind enough to think that I might make a catalogue of the books in the library, but to suggest in the kindest manner that I must allow him to remunerate me for my labour. I believe I broke into wild protestations that I would do anything for him for nothing and less than nothing, but he assumed a very Chancellor of the Exchequer-ish air and bade me remember that all work had its value, and that since I had my living to earn I must sell my labour in the best available market. And then he sat down at his desk and wrote a formal letter wherein he confirmed his verbal offer, and mentioned a sum as remuneration which made me wonder if the golden days had come again.

I felt six inches higher as I walked home that afternoon. It gave me great joy to find Uncle Benjamin in the house, still greater to lay Mr. Wickham's letter before him and my aunts. It was some proof

that if I was the fool about books that he said I was, my folly possessed some pecuniary value. And for anything possessing pecuniary value Uncle Benjamin entertained a due respect. He showed no great delight, nor evinced any surprise, at my news, but he remarked that as I was about to earn something for myself it would be a proper thing to do if I paid so much a week for what he was pleased to call my keep. Even Aunt Frances, who rarely, if ever, dared to combat her brother's opinions, was roused to protest against this mean suggestion, and Aunt Caroline, who loved Uncle Benjamin less every day, said a few sharp things which led to a wordy war. Finally Uncle Benjamin departed in his best injured-innocent mood, saying that we could all do what we liked, and that we were driving him mad. He opened the parlour window as he passed it on his way along the garden path which lay beneath it, and put his head into the room to observe that the more you did for some people—meaning myself—the less you were thanked for it. This was really an involuntary confession of mental obscurity on Uncle Benjamin's part, for he had never done anything for me in his life, whereas I had done a good deal for him.

I said good-bye to hoeing wheat and turnips, to looking after sheep, and to feeding cattle, and took up my quarters—in the day-time at any rate—in the library of the Manor House. Just as I had had no technical knowledge of indexing, so I had none of cataloguing; but I invented a plan of my own within a few hours which worked out to Mr. Wickham's complete satisfaction. I proved myself a typical new broom—if it had not been for Mr. Wickham I should have become as yellow as some of the old parchment

bindings. But he speedily discovered that I had acquired the trick of hard and constant work, and he pointed out to me that labour in the open air is a very different thing from labour within four walls. After that I became reasonable in the matter of indoor work, and found time to make excursions to neighbouring villages, castles, and old houses, which, near as they were, I had never seen before.

But what a Paradise those old rooms made!—what happiness it was to know that one was living amongst books—that there was no hurry—that the day would end amongst books and another day begin amongst books—the dearest friends, the most faithful companions, that man can have! Yes—Paradise.

Into this Paradise, with its scent of dried rose-leaves, suddenly came—Eve.

CHAPTER VIII.

ANDALUSIA.

AT the age of sixteen a boy of ardent temperament, of quick imagination, and of slavish devotion to beauty, whether of Nature or of Art, is already come to one of the most dangerous stretches of Life's ocean. He is neither a child, a hobbledehoy, nor a man ; he has not the innocence of the first, the masculine passion of the third, and certainly not the undefined longings of the second. Passion, if it is aroused in him, is of a golden sort ; it is the last shred left to us of the sacred veil which the Supreme Gods threw over men when they deserted earth for Olympus, never to return ; we have been tearing it to pieces ever since, but every now and then one or other of us finds himself unexpectedly in possession of what he fondly believes to be the very last scrap. The possession of that last scrap is, of course, the most important matter in the world ; to the possessor its importance is too great to be put into words, too awe-compelling to be spoken of. Is it not the mystic fetish which transmutes brass into gold ; Britannia metal into fine silver ; shoddy into satin ; aye, a sow's ear into a silken purse ? Little wonder, then, that if the sixteen-year-old, granted a taste for beauty, granted a romantic disposition, granted a warmly-inclined temperament, granted a long course of my Lord Byron and many opportunities of brooding in secret over the possibilities of a grand passion, should

suddenly find himself in possession of even one thread of this mystic rainbow-hued veil, his behaviour should become akin to that of one drunk with new wine, and that he should trip life's meadows with a riotous heart, his feet amongst violets, and his head, sun-aureoled, amongst the laughing stars.

The boy in love is a fool—and an unmitigated nuisance—to everybody about him. But he is not a fool to himself. He is very serious, very grave, very much in earnest. The man in love finds a moment wherein to enjoy a laugh at himself, and takes it; the boy knows no such moment, and would scorn to take it if he did. His first falling in love is to him the Beginning and the End—he crams All into it. Never can there be anything in all the times to come which can so transform a boy as this sudden revelation that in the Garden of which he is the Adam there is also an Eve. That discovery has done more to make boys Do things than all the rewards and punishments put together. One boy suddenly realises that he might use his nail-brush more frequently; another that he must really possess a tailed coat; a third that he might be more polite to his sister; a fourth that cheap cigarettes are rather bad form, after all; a fifth, that Life is an awful Responsibility. These are only a few effects of this great cause: none of the rest are harmful. And at the time being they are the greatest, the most serious, the most lastingly-important things not only that ever were, but that ever will be. For to the boy in love there is nothing at all in the world but his mistress and himself—especially himself.

It was on a June morning—glorious enough in itself without adventitious aid—that I became possessed of my rag-and-tatter of the mystic veil. I was

at work amongst my beloved books, and as happy as kings are supposed to be, and I had no idea of what was going to happen. I wonder what most of us would do if we did know what was going to happen? Should we stop and face it or go round the corner and hide in the hope that it would pass us by? My own impression—based on a certain belief in fatalism—is that if we went round the corner it would follow us, and we should have to reckon with It. I am quite sure that in my case if I had gone round the nearest corner to hide I should have found It there before me. It was one of those things that have got to be met.

A June morning, as I said—just about a year after my assault on Uncle Benjamin's mare—and an atmosphere of perfect summer in the library of the Manor House. I had the windows open—why did the thrushes sing so much more eloquently that particular morning?—why did the living roses in the garden mingle their scent so prodigally with that of their dead sisters in the china bowls?—why did the flash and tinkle of the fountain under the cedar tree make one think of Arethuse and Mincius and Lord knows what else?—why did the cedar itself perpetually invite one to repair into its shade and sport with Amaryllis? This is a sure trick of the Immortal Gods; when they are about to introduce bewitching Eve to simple, heart-whole Adam they first make him mad with summer sights and sounds.

Mrs. Wickham came into the library—as she often did. I liked to see her there; she seemed to give a certain sense of finish to the picture upon which I was so fond of gazing from my table at the end of the centre room. She was always a quaint, old-world

figure in her soft dove-coloured house-gowns, her swathes of lawn, her high-frilled caps, her silk mittens, and her painted fan, gay with shepherds and shepherdesses. She used to tip-toe about the rooms, now inspecting a book or a picture, now smelling at the dried rose-leaves, now gazing through one of the windows as if she had never seen that particular view before, now asking me in a hushed and reverential voice how I was getting on, and begging me most earnestly not to injure my eyes, and to be sure to rest them at least once an hour by closing them for quite five minutes, and warning me of certain dreadful consequences which might result if I did not, "or look at me, my dear! Here I am using glasses at sixty, whereas my dear mother could read moderately-sized print when she was ninety!"—and now saying that she was quite sure I must be faint after such arduous exertions and so many climbings up and down the library ladder, and that she was going to send me a glass of wine and a slice of cake, which I must consume instantly, or I should be found in a state of collapse. Then she would hurry off and be heard calling for John the footman as insistently as if the house were on fire, and John—who was about four times my own size, and wore a sky-blue coat, a yellow waistcoat, and white silk stockings—would presently appear with the cake and the wine on a large silver salver, and serve me as politely as if I were a Duke instead of a mere Person, as he no doubt considered me to be. Five minutes later Mrs. Wickham would look round the corner, full of anxiety, and would become wreathed in smiles to find that her timely intervention had saved my life for the time being, and would express her thankfulness, and tell me with

many nods and mysterious shakings of her cap that it would be such a dreadful thing if I allowed myself to be overwrought.

But upon this fateful June morning Mrs. Wickham was not alone. I heard her voice as she opened the door, and I looked up to see if Mr. Wickham was her companion, for I wanted some instructions from him. It was not Mr. Wickham—it was—ah! well, even after all these years it is not quite so easy as I thought it might be a sentence or two back to say what it was. Certainly I saw at once that it was a Young Woman. But—*what* a Young Woman! My mind became a whirl as soon as my eyes saw her—it was borne in upon me that I might possibly have become an imbecile and lost the power to think clearly. I seemed to have fallen asleep and to have awoke somewhere in the Olympian regions amongst a select picking of the goddesses. One or other of them obsessed my soul—was it Hebe, or Pallas, or Aphroditè, or Herè? No, it was some very Young Goddess, as yet unknown to me—a young goddess much more beautiful than the goddesses of power, of wisdom, and of beauty all rolled into one, with Hebe thrown in. She was a black young goddess, this, dark of hair, dark of eye, dark of complexion. But what hair!—it had “a hyacinthine flow,” like Leila’s, so admired of the Giaour—and what eyes!—also like Leila’s, full of a “dark charm”—and what a complexion!—once more like Leila’s, reminiscent of “the young pomegranate’s blossom.” And, goddess-like, she was tall, and stately, and imperious, and looked at things with a straight, fearless questioning from beneath level brows.

I was, of course, in a dream, I said to myself at

least a thousand times in the ensuing moment—I was dreaming of ancient Greece, or old Rome, and should wake to hear Mrs. Wickham telling me that I must really have some wine and cake. A dream—

“And Mr. Gerard Emery is making a catalogue of them, my dear,” Mrs. Wickham was saying in the hushed and reverential voice which always characterised her on her visits to the library. “Such a task!—so many thousands of books, you know, my love.”

The Young Goddess was regarding me with speculative eyes, I was staring at her with adoring reverence; I began to wonder what an eagle feels like if it really ever does look at the sun. She smiled—there was something curiously intimate and confidential and indulgent about the smile.

“I should think it’s jolly hard work!” said the Young Goddess. “Isn’t it?”

I believe I answered her question—I am much more certain of what she said to me than of what I said to her. Her voice—oh! It was as goddess-like as her eyes and hair and figure—liquid and deep, with a laugh somewhere at the back of it.

“But Mr. Gerard Emery is so very fond of books, you know, Andalusia, my love—aren’t you, Mr. Gerard?—that he would never leave them,” I heard Mrs. Wickham saying, after the Young Goddess and I had been flying together in empyrean heights, “and, you know, my dear, I have to exercise a little care over him and see that he does not overdo himself. It is time now for John to bring a little refreshment—it would be such a pity, you know, Mr. Gerard Emery, if you allowed—”

And then the dear old lady bustled out, intent on hospitality, and was presently heard calling loudly for

John, who, upon this occasion, was not, I am glad to say, immediately to hand. The Young Goddess lingered by my table staring at me. She made me very hot and uncomfortable and shy, but I liked to feel that she was there.

"You don't overdo yourself, do you?" she asked suddenly.

I smiled as I returned her look.

"I? Oh, no—it is only Mrs. Wickham's kindness."

"You are fond of books?"

"Very fond."

"Madly in love with them, I suppose. And yet—"

She paused, and looked at me more narrowly, and she drew her fine brows together as if something puzzled her.

"You don't look as if you were always poring over books," she said, with a plain directness which I soon knew to be one of her chief characteristics. "You've got such a healthy colour—you're as healthy-looking as a plough-boy."

I laughed.

"This is a very healthy village," I said.

She looked slowly round her—at the books, the pictures, the old furniture, at the glimpses of the garden, and I believe she checked an inclination to yawn.

"This is a very quiet old house," she said, regarding me with another of her speculative glances, as if she were endeavouring to appraise my value, or my possibilities, or something equally indefinite. "I don't think there's anything new or young within it—except you."

I made no reply to that beyond a smile.

"And you look very grave," she went on, still regarding me speculatively. "It's the books, I suppose. Do you ever laugh?"

"Laugh? Yes—sometimes—when there is anything to laugh at."

"Laugh now. Quick! Laugh!"

"But there is nothing to laugh at," I protested.

She stamped her foot.

Then I suddenly burst into laughter—real laughter. John was entering with his salver, his mouth wide open at the scene before him. The Young Goddess turned and saw him; she, too, burst into hearty laughter.

John, stern and solemn, marched up, and set his salver in its appointed place, and delivered his usual polite message from Mrs. Wickham to myself. Then he bowed most respectfully to the Young Goddess.

"The mistress's love, my lady, and she is ready to take your la'ship through the kitchen gardens."

Her ladyship made a face behind John's back, and a little mouth at me, and swam or glided or floated out of the room. A moment later she opened the door, and put her head within.

"Thank you for laughing, Mr. Gerard Emery," she said archly. "If you had not laughed I should have screamed. Good-bye—mind you don't overdo yourself."

Her ladyship? Andalusia? I ate my cake and drank my wine and wondered who this fine young creature was. Andalusia!—why, Andalusia was a province of Spain, surely. I turned to a gazetteer and consulted it on this point. Yes, there we were—Andalusia, one of the most fertile portions of Spain, drained by the Guadalquivir—lots of gipsies (*gitanos*)

there, women famous for their grace and beauty—the country of Lucan the poet, Seneca the philosopher, Trajan the emperor. Andalusia! what a liquid, musical, altogether delightful name, suggestive of sunlight, and moonlight, and of—love. Of course, she could have no other name than—Andalusia.

But who was she, and how came she to be named Andalusia, and what was she doing at the Manor House? And should I see her again?

I had small appetite for dinner at Highcroft Farm that day, and my Aunt Frances was of opinion that I needed some spring medicine, although spring was nearly over. I hastened back to the Manor House earlier than usual—I wanted to feel that I was under the same roof with her. And while I jogged away at my cataloguing I was thinking of her all the time. Possibly some telepathic communication passed between us, for in the middle of the afternoon she came to me. It was quite evident that she was accustomed to make herself very much at home wherever she went, and to stand on no ceremony, for before she had been in the library five minutes she christened me Little Doctor Bookworm, and began to talk to me as confidentially as if we had known each other all our lives. And before long I knew all about her—she was Mrs. Wickham's niece, and her father was the Earl of St. Vithiens, whose lineage was as high as the present state of his pocket was low, she said, and her mother was a Spanish beauty with a string of musical names which I could never remember or spell, and she herself was called Andalusia because she had been born at Seville, which is, as everybody knows, one of the three chief cities of that most beautiful of provinces. And she had come to spend a few weeks

with Mr. and Mrs. Wickham, and she hoped it was not going to be very dull, and wanted to know if Mr. and Mrs. Wickham usually went to sleep after lunch, and spent the rest of the afternoon in visiting sick people, and when I said that I believed that was the usual thing she yawned openly, and tapped her foot on the carpet, and bade me do something to amuse her. She might as well have asked me to fly to the moon with her ; people whose amusements are chiefly of a grave and serious sort are somewhat at a loss when they are asked to jump through paper hoops or to execute strange gymnastic feats. It was by the merest accident, and after much finessing about, that I discovered she liked to hear folk-lore stories, legends and ghost tales. I was as well primed with these things—picked up from the country folk, and stored away with jealous care—as an egg is full of meat, and I began to reel them off, only to find that as one was finished she wanted another. She was an excellent listener, and had a great taste for the mysterious and even the horrible, and her great dark eyes dilated and her red lips pouted when I told her such stories as Wiseman Wilkinson and the Devil, and Mason Bee and the White Rabbit, and it was easy to see that in another age she would have kept a retinue of jongleurs and tale-tellers about her chair, and have idled away whole summer afternoons as pleasantly as did Pampinea and her companions in their Tuscan garden. Never did any young woman of nineteen know better how to idle than Andalusia did. I can see her now, a lazy *dolce-far-niente*-loving beauty, lying back in one of the big easy chairs in the library, with a plate of peaches or of purple grapes in her lap, listening intently while I racked my brains

for new stories. She was a capricious beauty, too—if I told her a story which took her fancy in more than ordinary fashion she would give me the largest peach or the finest grapes, and run her fingers through my hair in sign of approval; but she also boxed my ears more than once.

I think Mr. and Mrs. Wickham found their young guest somewhat difficult to understand and rather hard to entertain. She had lived the greater part of her life in Spain, and did not share English tastes in the matter of outdoor pursuits. They had a dinner party or two for her; the chief pleasure she seemed to get out of them was in imitating the various guests to me next day. In those days croquet was moribund, and lawn tennis scarcely born, but Mrs. Wickham gave a garden party whereat both games were played, chiefly by a posse of very young and very energetic officers from the barracks at Sicaster and by some of the hunting young women of the neighbourhood. That was no great success, either, judging by Andalusia's account of it—she could not understand the English passion for anything in the shape of a ball, cricket ball, tennis ball, or croquet ball, and she objected to people looking unduly heated. An easy chair; warmth; tales of love, mystery, horror; an occasional tinkle on her guitar, to whose accompaniment she sometimes sang Spanish songs in a deep voice—these were the things which chiefly appealed to Lady Andalusia Trewithen, probably as a result of her mingled Cornish and Spanish ancestry.

Of course I was madly in love with Andalusia from the very first. Of course I believed that I should never, never love any other woman. Of course I had day-dreams about her and myself. I should become a

Great Poet—I was writing hundreds of lines about her and her beauty every day—and when Mr. Tennyson died the Queen would make me Poet Laureate, and then I should be in a position to ask her father, belted Earl though he was, for her hand. In the meantime I should conceal my love. That was the proper thing to do—it was always done in the books. Yet there were occasions, such as when Andalusia stroked my hair—as she was very fond of doing—or put her arm round my neck to look at some book over which I was bending—she was very familiar in that way—whereon I found it hard to refrain from throwing myself at her feet and pouring out all that was in my soul.

I went through all the various stages of the disease. I suddenly developed a most remarkable taste for fine clothes. Mr. Langton had presented me with ten pounds for the help I had given him. As it was my own money, honestly earned, I put it in my pocket one day, and going to Sicaster I ordered two new suits of clothes, and fortunately had sufficient knowledge, gained by an observation of Uncle Richard's swell attire, to instruct the tailor in the art of making them. The first time that Uncle Benjamin saw me in one of these new suits (and in a smart hat, and flourishing a smart cane) he asked me if I knew how long it usually took a Perfect Fool to go to the Devil. Even Aunt Frances warned me against encouraging expensive tastes. But that was not all. Going one day to the best barber's in Sicaster, he asked me why, with my particular type of face and build of head, I did not wear my hair rather long and have it curled. I fell to his blandishments and temptations. On the way home I met Mr. and Mrs.

Benjamin Harrington in their dog-cart. Mrs. Benjamin seemed greatly amused at the sight of me; her husband, pulling up at the road-side, asked me with mock gravity—and his usual sneer—where my organ was, and if I still had the same monkey. On my staring at him he pulled off his hat, begged my pardon, and said he had mistaken me for an Italian organ-grinder who used to frequent those parts, but he now saw I was some other sort of foreigner—no doubt a great violinist or a painter. The next time he met me, however, he told me plainly that I should find myself at the Devil before I knew where I was.

That sort of thing made me reflect a good deal. As I had earned the money to pay for them, why should I not have new clothes? Since I was having new clothes why should they not be becoming and well cut? If it suited me to wear my hair long and to have it curled why should anybody object? In short, why should other people interfere with what was my own personal affair? Did it injure Uncle Benjamin to see me in the first good coat I had ever possessed in my life? And why should smart clothes and curled hair be regarded as sign-posts indicating the first slopes of the descent to Avernus?

The next time Uncle Benjamin asked me if I knew how long it took a Perfect Fool to go to the Devil I answered wearily that I was quite sure he must know from his own experience, and that I could not dream of hazarding an answer to a question in which I had no interest. It was rude and disrespectful, no doubt, and not to be approved of for a moment—but where did a bully ever find respect?

However, I was just then oblivious to almost

everything but Andalusia. I became a sort of personal attendant to her. She had a way of getting everything that she wanted, and she twisted Mr. and Mrs. Wickham round her fingers with the greatest ease. They were indulgent old people, and I suppose they saw no harm in allowing Andalusia and myself to spend the greater part of the day together in the big gardens, amongst the woods, in the old, time-fragrant chambers, nooks, and corners of the old house. I suppose they never dreamed that a boy of sixteen could fall madly in love with a girl two years his senior--dear simple souls! And no doubt they looked upon us as children--and forgot that children are only little men and little women.

It was in the middle of July, when Andalusia had been the star of my soul for something more than a month, that the episode of Dead Man's Copse took its proper place in our joint history and occasioned rufflings of more or less degree in the slumbering streams of life about us.

Old Wraby, waxing confidential to me over an extra pint of ale one night, told me a fearsome tale of the ultimate fate of Jack-the-Flyer, said to be the last of the various highwaymen who had picked up their livings on our part of the Great North Road. Finally taken within the borders of our parish, he had been tried and executed at York Castle, but because he had made his usual place of refuge in a certain thick wood called Dead Man's Copse, which stood on high ground a mile or two outside Wintersleave village, the authorities had caused his body to be brought there and hung in chains in the little clearing wherein Jack and his horse had often found shelter.

"And there it did rattle an' remble i' th' wind until th' flesh on it did drop off wi' th' clothes as he was a-wearin' of," said old Wraby. "An' i' th' end the booäns they dropped all to pieces and was a-picked up by summun unbeknownst and carried off for Christian beryal, but that there contraption what he was a-hung up in—why, ain't it there to this very day, a-rattlin' and a-shakin' i' th' wind?—'tain't no more nor forty year since I seed it mysen. An' if so be as mortal man do go there at midnight, and can bide the lonesomeness on it, why, they do say that the ghost of Jack-the-Flyer and his hoss do appear uncommon nat'ral—so they do!"

I carried this story—with the proper embellishments—to Andalusia. She rewarded me in more generous fashion than usual, and gave me three out of six nectarines which the gardener—much against his will—had been coaxed into parting with. After which she announced her intention of visiting Dead Man's Copse—and at midnight.

"But that's quite impossible!" I said. "Mrs. Wickham——"

Andalusia snapped her fingers.

"And it is so far."

Andalusia crammed a nectarine between my lips.

"Besides," said I, "Dead Man's Copse is on Sir Geoffrey Gardiner's estate, and his keepers——"

"Coward!" said Andalusia. "Your thin English blood is afraid! I am going."

I heaved a deep sigh.

"Then I shall go, too," I said desperately.

"Of course," she said, quite calmly. "You must find the means."

"Means? Oh! You mean——"

"I shall get out of my window when they are all gone to bed," she answered. "Everybody is in bed here by half-past ten. How long will it take us to walk to this place?"

"Oh, three-quarters of an hour."

"Then we will start at eleven. You must be hiding in the shrubbery, in front of my window."

"But—but—how are you going to get down?"

"You must get me a rope," said Andalusia. "*Madre de Dios!*—did I not say you must find me the means? How slow you are! A rope—I know how to climb down a rope. I got out of one of the convent windows like that. You wrap towels round your hands and wrists so that the rope does not chafe you, and then you slide down. It is easy. But oh—*ay de mi!* I had forgotten that——"

"That—what?"

"That I have nothing but long gowns! They will be torn to rags. You must get me some clothes—some of yours."

"Mine! But—but—they—I mean I—they—I mean you are so much taller than I am!"

"Nonsense! a woman always looks taller than a man. Stand up against my back—there—now put that big book on the top of our heads. There, I am only an inch taller—that is nothing. I will have that nice suit you wore yesterday."

Horror! One of my beloved new suits! To go scrambling through woods and hedgerows in one of my new suits! And at midnight!

"But—but—but, Lady Andalusia," I said. "If—if—you see—you are—you see it—it won't fit! You—you are so much, so much—well—don't you think I am a bit—a bit—thin?"

She turned on me like a tigress, and seizing me by the shoulders shook me until my teeth rattled.

"How dare you say I am fat?" she demanded.
"Oh!—I shall kill you!"

"No, no, please!" I pleaded. "At least, I mean, kill me just now if you want to, but don't think that I said you were—because, truly, truly, I don't think you are. But—but you are—well, you are—plump."

She looked at me searchingly for a moment, and then she suddenly laughed and ran her fingers through my hair, and bade me bring the clothes and the rope in a parcel at dusk that night, and to be ready to meet her in the shrubbery outside her window at eleven o'clock. And that agreed upon I went home to tea, feeling that the coming night was fraught with heavy responsibilities. Supposing anybody saw Andalusia descending from her window by means of a rope? Supposing that the rope was found dangling from the window before we returned? Supposing Aunt Frances, who, by reason of her long vigils with my grandmother, was a very light sleeper, should hear me creeping downstairs? Supposing—but there I stopped, knowing very well that since Andalusia had said the thing must be it would have to be.

At dusk, having previously procured an old cart-rope from the stables (I purposely selected an old one so that Andalusia's hands might not be skinned in case the towels slipped) and made it and the doomed new suit into a bundle, I slipped off to the Manor House and deposited it in a certain place in one of the arbours. But I am not sure that I did not utter some sort of invocation to the High Gods that Andalusia might be prevented from finding the bundle, or, having found it, from escaping from her bedroom.

I was neither cowardly nor faint-hearted, but I knew what it might mean if our escapade were made public.

I got out of Highcroft Farm in secrecy and safety, and was safely hidden in the shrubbery opposite Andalusia's window well before the clock in the stable turret struck eleven. It was a warm July night, and it would never be a dark one. I was not sure that it might not rain—certainly, even if we were preserved from chill night airs, we ran a good chance of getting wet through, for the wind was in a rainy quarter. I kept an anxious eye on the window—at last the blind moved, the window went up, something like a sinuous serpent began to glide slowly down the wall. That was the rope. The window was opened still farther—a head and shoulders came into view, seemed to reconnoitre, and disappeared again. Then an unmistakable leg came over the window-sill, and was followed by another—and in another second there was Andalusia, in my new suit, sliding down the rope! A second more, and she was by my side.

We waited a moment, both breathing very hard (from sheer excitement, of course, not from anything else) and listening with all our four ears for any sound. A dog barked in one of the village farmsteads, but everything about the Manor House was as quiet as the grave. Andalusia, in a deep whisper, bade me lead the way. We tip-toed out of the shrubbery, climbed a fence, and found ourselves in the Home Park.

Andalusia shivered—at the silence. She was obliged to give me her hand. I stole a glance at her, and was surprised to find how very well she looked in my clothes—much better than I did. I said so—in a whisper.

"Stupid!" she whispered back fiercely. "You forgot to bring me boots and a cap. Fortunately, I had some strong shooting boots, and I have twisted a turban out of a silk scarf. I have a revolver in my pocket. Oh!—is that a cow?"

"If you cling to me like that," I said, "we shall never get to Dead Man's Copse. It *is* a cow, and there is another, and there a third, and there——"

"Never mind!" she said, magnanimously. "They are all asleep. Are we going to walk through fields all the way?"

"We mustn't go by the road, anyhow," I replied. "The Wintersleave policeman goes down the road to meet his sergeant at the cross-roads at twelve, and he would stop us. Then there are the keepers and watchers—we might run across them. We will keep to the fields until we come out opposite Dead Man's Copse, then cross the road, dodge into the Copse, and make our way to the clearing."

"Only let us get there by midnight," she said.

We pushed on across the meadows outside the Home Park. We climbed post-and-rail fences; we crawled through gaps in the hedgerows; we disturbed sheep and cattle; we heard all the curious sounds of night. And at last we found ourselves in Dead Man's Copse, as lonely and as eerie a place as the most ardent lover of dark spots and dark deeds done therein could desire. Hand in hand we made our way along a shooters' drive towards the middle of the wood—I had never been there before, oddly enough, but I had obtained definite instructions from old Wraby—until we came to the clearing sacred to Jack-the-Flyer. In the dim light we saw the remains of the iron cage in which his body had been hung;

we heard it creak gratingly in the light flow of the wind. Still holding each other very tightly by the hand, we backed against a tree and waited.

Far away in the distance the clock in Winter-sleave church tower struck twelve. I heard Andalusia's heart beating. Perhaps she heard mine. We kept a steady look out for Jack-the-Flyer and his horse. But at the end of ten minutes nothing had happened, except that an owl hooted once or twice from somewhere far off in the woods.

We tacitly agreed that we were not going to see anything that night, and we turned to go homewards. But ere we were out of the Copse something did happen. The night had grown warmer and warmer until it was quite close ; the atmosphere in the woods was most oppressive. Quite suddenly, without a moment's warning, a flash of steel-blue lightning showed us every leaf and twig against the sky ; a crash of thunder followed, and then the rain came in big, heavy drops, rapidly increasing in force.

"Now we are in for it!" I cried. "Run—run!"

I had noticed a little barn in a field just outside the Copse ; towards this I hurried Andalusia as quickly as she could cover the ground. The door was only secured by a string latch ; I had it open in an instant, and we had a roof over our heads. There was no more lightning ; no more thunder ; but the rain suddenly came down in torrents.

Joy of joys!—the little barn was full of sweet, new-garnered hay, dry and warm. We made a nest in it and sat down and listened to the rain beating on the roof above us. Was there ever such rain!—it seemed as if all the heavens had opened.

Andalusia wanted to know how we were going to

get back in a storm like that, and added that it was much more comfortable there amongst the hay than it would be in the meadows. I was of her opinion on that point; as to our return—well, that depended upon the rain. It was certain to me, however, that we were in for a wet night—a real summer night's rain, when the sky weeps in solemn earnest.

The rhythmic beat of the rain upon the roof conducted to sleep—more than once I felt my head droop forward.

"Oh, how sleepy I am!" said Andalusia. "I——"

I have vague, misty notions that I suddenly became transformed into one of those toy models which represent a Chinese mandarin, nodding, nodding, nodding—— And then—what dreams of—Andalusia!

Then it was suddenly morning, and somebody was shaking me by the shoulder, and I rubbed my eyes, and was dazzled by the sunlight, and became wide awake to find the Wintersleave policeman and one of Sir Geoffrey's keepers in the barn. But Andalusia, curled up in the hay at my side, was sleeping like a dormouse!

CHAPTER IX.

TRANSFORMATIONS.

DEAR town-bred believer in the sweet simplicity of rustic manners, in the guileless innocence of the rustic mind, do you really think that Arcadia does not love a scandal as dearly as scandals are loved in Belgravia and Mayfair? Do you still get your conception of country life and country thought from Cowper and Goldsmith and Mrs. Hemans; do you still cling to the impression that all uncharitableness, evil-mindedness, backbiting, and tale-telling is confined to the front drawing-room and the back kitchen of the city? Do you still believe that the ancient gaffers who sit under the shade of the beech trees on the village green talk of nothing but wheat and turnips and the good old days, or that the old gammers at their cottage doors or over their tea tables care nothing for a bit of spicy gossip? Miserable and deplorable ignorance! Your real Arcadia is a hot-bed of scandal, and your true Arcadian loves rumour better than beer.

There was a great to-do about Andalusia and myself. Everything turned out badly for us. It was a great pity that the weather was what it was that night. True, there was but one peal of thunder, but one flash of lightning, but they wrought great damage —to us. Mrs. Wickham, like my Aunt Frances, was a light sleeper—the thunder woke her up. Her first thought was for her young guest—she was quite sure that the child must be frightened. So she summoned

her maid, Mrs. Feathers, and sent her to Lady Andalusia's room with an intimation that the thunder in our part of the world was usually very well behaved and troubled us little. Mrs. Feathers returned to say that Lady Andalusia's bedroom was untenanted, that the bed had not been slept in, that Lady Andalusia's garments were here, there, and everywhere (with a remark in significant parenthesis that the young lady had refused her, Mrs. Feathers's, services on retiring), and that the window was not only wide open, but that a rope was dangling from it. Thereupon arose a great to-do. Even Mr. Wickham lost his head. A hasty examination of Lady Andalusia's wardrobe proved that Lady Andalusia had either flown in borrowed plumes or as naked as she was born. As the latter alternative was quite out of the question, Mrs. Wickham decided that there had been an elopement, and immediately began to speculate upon the man who must be mixed up in it. Meanwhile, Mr. Wickham aroused the men-servants and made them search the gardens and shrubberies. Eventually he dispatched John to the policeman, who, being just returned from his regular round, cursed Lady Andalusia with great fervour for dragging him out of a warm bed into a wet night. Then there was knocking up of other people, and dispatching of mounted messengers this way and that, and before daylight the whole village was astir.

Never did anything turn out more unfortunately. It was one of those affairs in which every single thing goes wrong. It was also the sort of thing that may not be hushed up. It was all very well to try the hushing-up process, but when you have a fatuous policeman to deal with on one side, and a perfect ass



"I HAD TO LISTEN TO A LONG AND SERIOUS LECTURE
FROM AUNT SOPHIA."

(p. 141.)

of a gamekeeper—especially when he is employed on another estate, and jealous about pheasants and things—on the other, it is impossible to keep tongues from wagging. The whole countryside roared with laughter. An Earl's daughter dressed in boy's clothes, asleep in a wayside barn at four o'clock of a summer's morning! Did anyone ever hear the like?

This was one of these little one-act comedies wherein all the actors disappear at the end of the piece with a marvellous celerity. There were two or three days of—well, never mind them now, they are over and gone, but their memory makes me tingle—and then a change came over everything. Lady Andalusia Trewithen was returned to her noble parent; Mr. and Mrs. Wickham went on a long visit to the North of Scotland; I was sent to stay with the Winterbees at Kingsport.

I was not sorry to go to Kingsport—Wintersleave was too hot an oven for any cat to jump in just then. True, I had to listen to a long and serious lecture from Aunt Sophia on the night of my arrival, during the delivery of which Mr. Winterbee sat as meekly as if he were in chapel, blinking alternately at his wife and myself through his gold-rimmed spectacles.

"And I wish you to understand," said my Aunt Sophia, in concluding a lengthy discourse on youthful wickedness and folly, "that such goings-on could never be approved of by your Uncle Winterbee and me for one moment. Your Uncle Winterbee, employing six-and-forty young men as he does—every one of them members of the Young People's Christian and Moral Society—could not countenance such improper proceedings as going out at nights with young girls dressed in boys' clothes, whatever their rank in life

may be, and the higher they are, more shame to them! I've no patience with such giddy young women!"

"Serious thing, you know, Gerard, serious thing!" said Mr. Winterbee, clearing his throat and going through the penguin exercise. "Mad freak—mad freak; young folks will be young folks, but serious matter, see-ee-eerious matter, sir. An Earl's daughter, too, you say? Pretty girl?"

"Lady Andalusia Trewithen is a most beautiful girl," I answered.

"Fiddle-de-dee!" snapped my Aunt Sophia. "I wonder what you know about such things. And I wonder at you, William, asking such a foolish question. Pretty, indeed! I wonder what that's got to do with it."

Mr. Winterbee replied, "Oh, nothing—nothing, my dear!" and became a penguin again until the evening paper arrived. But next morning, as I walked with him from his private house in the suburbs to his principal place of business in the town, he insisted on having the whole episode related to him in detail, and it gave him so much enjoyment, and caused him to laugh so heartily, that my old conviction as to the difference between Mr. Winterbee in Aunt Sophia's presence and Mr. Winterbee out of it was considerably deepened.

"Mustn't tell your Aunt Sophia all that, you know, Gerard," he said, with a confidential wink; "mustn't tell your Aunt—no. Good woman, your Aunt Sophia, ex-cell-ent woman. But — old-fashioned, sir, old-fashioned. They all are. Your Aunt Frances is old-fashioned—I consider your Aunt Frances is a ve-ry old-fashioned woman. Good

woman, too, good woman. Dear me! An Earl's daughter, you say? Poor nobleman?"

"I believe Lord St. Vithiens is poor," I answered.

"Lots of 'em are," said Mr. Winterbee with a sniff. "Poor as the—poor as a church mouse, you know. Can't rub two halfpennies together. Don't know how they live. Strange thing, sir, stra-a-a-ange thing. Curious connection between blue blood and no money. And a fine girl? Good figure, eh? To be sure, to be sure! Well, well!—young folks will be young folks. Your Aunt Sophia is getting old; yes, getting old is your Aunt Sophia. Can't help it, you know, can't help it. Not her fault, sir, not her fault. Can't always be young, you know, Gerard, can't always be young. Not to be expected. You're older, you know, than you were this time last year. No standing still with time, sir—no standing still with time. Time, sir, moves onward—onward. Dear me—daughter of a noble Earl. Pretty girl, eh? Well—well—human nature, sir, is a queer thing—a queer thing is human nature."

I quite agreed with Mr. Winterbee on that point, and I endured all Aunt Sophia's homilies for his sake, especially as he was by no means averse to hearing me talk of Andalusia. My description of how she climbed out of the window and slid down the rope interested him immensely, and he seemed so entirely sympathetic that I confided to him my stern resolve to make a great name for myself and marry the Earl of St. Vithiens' daughter. Mr. Winterbee replied that he had known of much stranger things than that, and in the intervals of a penguin performance gave me several examples which had come under his own notice of remarkable alliances.

"Look at Sir Hercules Huckaback, of St. Paul's Churchyard!" he said. "Leading house in their particular line, sir—Huckaback, Cheapway, and Huckaback. Great man, Sir Hercules. Self-made man, sir—no silver spoon in his case. Began life, sir, as I did—behind the counter. Far-seeing man, sir: Lord Mayor, you know—yes, Lord Mayor was Sir Hercules. Not Sir Hercules then—no, sir; knighted, sir, by her Gracious Majesty at conclusion of his mayoralty. Married Lord Threadneedle's daughter—great financial union. Warm man, sir, before he was thirty. Millionaire now, Sir Hercules Huckaback. All by strict attention to business. Attend to your business, sir, and your business will attend to you. Fact, I assure you. Know many instances. Also known many more instances of exact opposite—yes. Known both men and mice in my time—not gone through world with my eyes shut—no!"

If going through the world with one's eyes wide open was a thing highly to be commended, I must have been in a state of high perfection during my stay in Kingsport. I had always been full of curiosity and inquisitiveness about everything from the earliest age, and now, when I had the opportunity of examining a great shipping town, I took good care to avail myself of it. I explored Kingsport from one end to the other—its great docks, its wharves, the strange nooks and corners in out-of-the-way places, the narrow streets which led to the old harbour, the ancient houses wherein merchants were doing business with far-off lands as far back as the days of the first Edward. I mingled with seamen of all nations—fair-haired Swedes, swarthy Easterns, greasy Russians, hatchet-jawed Yankees. I poked my nose

into all sorts of places—even into queer little rooms in queer little taverns, in spite of the fact that their doors were labelled “For Master Mariners Only.” How many false and true stories of the sea I heard I cannot remember; I used to retail them to Mr. and Mrs. Winterbee at night, and no doubt embellished them a good deal. Mr. Winterbee was complimentary enough to say that there was no doubt I had the gift of the gab, and Mrs. Winterbee sighed, and said she hoped I should turn it to good purpose, and not think of writing trashy novels about love and such-like foolishness. This advice was just then quite superfluous—I was engaged on a poem of some ambition, and used to write out every morning the lines which I had composed the previous day as I wandered about the port. It described the agonies undergone by a highly sensitive mind consequent upon the sudden violent uprooting of the tree of youthful affection, which, in my opinion at that time, was the only tree in all life’s woodland that had aught to recommend it. There was a good deal about Andalusia in it, and much more about myself and my own feelings. My sole recollection of it now is that it was written in the Spenserian stanza and divided into cantos, and that I applied the epithet “golden” to the estuary whereupon Kingsport stood—a big indulgence in poetic licence, if not an absolute lie, for there never was a muddier stretch of water since steamboats robbed the sea of half its charm.

It was a good thing that I had Kingsport on one hand and my poem on the other—to say nothing of my Aunt Sophia’s opinion upon mankind in general and me in particular—as a means of distraction, for I was sore hit about Andalusia. I had not been per-

mitted to say good-bye to her, and I did not know where she was. She had once told me that her ancestral hall was a fearsome castle, overlooking the Atlantic, in one of the loneliest parts of Cornwall; she had also added that her father, the Earl, by virtue of his marriage with her mother, possessed another castle—this time in Spain—which, according to her accounts of it, must have been about as inviting a place to reside in as some of the Touraine châteaux which Doré pictured in his worst nightmares. My fevered, yet practical, imagination saw Andalusia immersed in a dungeon in one or other of these strongholds; nay, it even conceived her in chains. She had once told me that her father was the mildest-mannered, easiest-going parent that ever lived, but my artistic sense put that on one side; for my present purposes he must be as stern of purpose as Abraham, and as implacable as Azo. Oh, my poor Andalusia!—who, as I learnt in years to come, went forth gaily from her disgrace at Wintersleave and told the whole story to her father as a good joke.

But I wanted someone to confide in just then; of whom should I think but Sylvia, my faithful little friend of so many happy weeks? I wrote her a letter which filled several sheets of my best manuscript paper—foolscap size—and told her all. I explained my views about Love. I said that a man could never Love but Once. I said that Andalusia represented to me the Absolute Perfection of woman. I further said that I had at last seen deep down into the Heart of things, and was convinced that the life-long worship of—well, of Andalusia—was the true career of one like myself whose frame was already attenuated with the pains of separation. That I

should die young, I concluded, I knew well, but Andalusia's name would be found engraved on my heart, and I should like Sylvia to keep my memory green, and—if she could manage it—to lay my poem on my quiet breast when I was being prepared for my grave, which I desired to be as near as possible to a certain yew-tree in Wintersleave churchyard.

Sylvia—for a child of fourteen—replied very nicely and sympathetically. She said that it must be nice to love like That. She also said that Andalusia ought to be very proud to be so much beloved—a remark which made me think a great deal. She counselled me not to despair, and begged me not to die just yet. She even hinted that perhaps Andalusia would prefer some prolongation of my existence. And she said further that it would give her—Sylvia—great, great pain if I died, so young, and would I please take the greatest care of my health!

Whether it was because of my love-sickness for Andalusia, or from some germ breathed or swallowed in one or other of the holes and corners of Kingsport out of which I could not keep my nose from poking, I do not know, but it is certain that on my return to Wintersleave—where harvest was in full swing, and much hard work lay in wait for me—I was stricken with a strange fever which brought me as near to death's door as one may reasonably expect to get without actually dying, kept me an invalid all that winter, and handed me over to the following spring in need of much repair. They said that I was delirious during the earlier stages of this illness, and babbled much of Andalusia and of my ambitions with respect to her and the next vacancy in the Laureateship—fortunately, most of these unconscious confidences

were made to Aunt Caroline, who was my devoted nurse, and had always sympathised with me as regards my love affair. She would never tell me what I said in these ravings, but I am sure that she was greatly affected by them.

When I became convalescent I noticed a great change in Aunt Caroline. There was a new softness in her eyes, a new brightness in her expression, a new smile about her lips. The Reason of it all came to tea one winter afternoon; Aunt Frances being occupied in attending to my grandmother, the Reason and Aunt Caroline and myself had tea together. He was a young Nonconformist minister, who had come to Sicaster during my absence in Kingsport, and that he was very much in love with Aunt Caroline I saw at once. Without having any great affection for ministers as a class—I had seen too many of them at my grandmother's tea table—I took an instant liking to Mr. Robert Moseley. He was a youthful-minded gentleman bordering upon middle age, of quiet, unassuming manners, a very high forehead, and kindly eyes. He did not snuffle in his speech as most of the ministers did; he never quoted Scripture as an illustration in ordinary talk; he was free from littleness and narrowness, and so far from thinking cricket an idle game, he was something of an enthusiast about it. When he had gone away that night I told Aunt Caroline that she would be an ass if she didn't marry him. Aunt Caroline replied—as shyly as a girl of sixteen—that she thought I was right.

They began to get seriously alarmed about me that spring. I was out of all danger—had, in fact, been in a state of convalescence for months—but I drew no nearer to absolute recovery. I was listless

and weary, and could not put on the flesh I had lost. People used to visit me—Mr. and Mrs. Wickham, who had already forgiven me generously for my share in the Jack-the-Flyer matter, Mr. Langton, Mr. Moseley, and others—and I knew they all thought I was not long for this world. Aunt Frances used to talk to me about my soul, but I much preferred to receive Aunt Caroline's confidences about her love affair. Uncle Benjamin was resigned—and doleful. He always asked me how I felt every time he came, and now and then he brought me a bottle of good old port—all the Harringtons had a profound belief in the virtues of anything alcoholic—but he never failed to remind me that my father was a poor, weakly man, who had died of consumption, and that I could not expect a better fate. I used to receive these comforting assurances with perfect equanimity—at that period it mattered very little to me what happened.

It was Mrs. Winterbee—as was proper and fitting, considering that she was the most business-like member of the whole family—who came to the front at this juncture and asserted herself in characteristic fashion. Coming over to Wintersleave and finding me able to do no more than sit propped up with pillows all day long when I ought to have been out in the sunlight, she summoned the old family doctor and—to use her own phrase—had it out with him. The old family doctor said that I was at a critical period. Also that my mind was much too active for my body. Further, that I was growing too fast. Moreover, that I wanted a complete change. If I had a complete change for a year or two I should in all probability turn out a strong man. He had the sense to add that it would do no harm to give me a chance.

In a family council, convened and presided over by Aunt Sophia, who in virtue of her position as the wife of an eminently prosperous tradesman, whose partner was Mayor of Kingsport, considered herself the principal personage of the Harrington tribe, it was resolved that the chance should be afforded me. It turned out, when things were looked into, that there was a little money which should have been my mother's, and was therefore mine. Uncle Benjamin said he was keeping it until I was twenty-one: Aunt Sophia, backed up by her sisters, insisted that this money should be forthcoming at once. She knew of a highly respectable schoolmaster, held in great estimation amongst the members of the Dissenting communion to which she and Mr. Winterbee belonged, who had his establishment in one of the healthiest parts of the North of England, and made it his special business to take delicate youths into his charge and to build up their constitution while he improved their education. To him Mrs. Winterbee was resolved I should go, and she impressed upon me her sincere desire that when I had got my health and strength back and was something of an adept at figures, I should be a sensible boy and appreciate the glory which would follow an apprenticeship to the trade of chemist and druggist—a calling which for her seemed to possess a peculiar fascination.

I was packed off to Mr. Trainer at Hethton as soon as the doctor considered me fit to travel. I was not at all anxious to go to him—indeed, I was not desirous of doing anything at all just then. But I soon found that I had come to the right place. Hethton stood in the midst of a beautiful valley, rich in scenery and old houses, churches, and castles. Mr.

Trainer's house overlooked the little town and the valley from a considerable altitude ; above it stretched the high moors, clothed in heather and ling and gorse. It was a pleasant house, with big rooms and large gardens. Mr. Trainer had some twenty or twenty-five pupils, all considered by their parents or doctors to be more or less delicate. His system of dealing with them was original, and it was peculiarly pleasing to them. There was just as much school as each individual pupil felt he could bear. Some—having a natural inclination for work—did a good deal ; others —having none—did nothing. Most of our time, I think, was spent out of doors ; roaming about the hills and moors, going on long walking expeditions to old castles, abbeys, churches ; playing cricket and tennis in summer and football in winter. A few months of this sort of life, lived in that keen, health-giving air, developed the most weakly lad into a bright-eyed young animal full of vigour—nowhere have I ever seen such appetites as those which were brought into evidence at Trainer's. And Mr. Trainer kept a very liberal table. Himself, his family, and his pupils lived on the fat of the land. Fond parents, coming now and then to see how their darlings were getting on and being invited to dinner, went away delighted to think that Tom's or Dick's appetite had improved so much, and that Mr. Trainer knew so well what growing boys really needed. It often struck me, who had been accustomed to the plainer diet of a farmhouse in which waste was considered a sin, that Trainer's young gentlemen were fed much too well, and I used to wonder how Trainer did it. So did other people. But the explanation was a simple one. The establishment had been in existence twelve

months when I went there ; at the end of another twelve months it came to a sudden end—Mr. Trainer was obliged to seek the protection of the Bankruptcy Court. It then turned out that Mr. Trainer, highly respected as he was by the Dissenting community to which he—and Mrs. Winterbee—belonged, had a mania for speculation, and that the stockbrokers and the starting-price merchants had seen the colour of his money much oftener than the butcher and the baker, to say nothing of the grocer and the green-grocer. And so an end.

Thrown back upon Wintersleave, with the great advantages of restored health and—at last!—a passable knowledge of mathematics—the only subject I had given any attention to in the Trainer establishment, I was solemnly warned by Aunt Sophia Winterbee that the compounding of drugs was my true mission in life. I was also reminded that I was now eighteen years of age. Uncle Benjamin wanted to know what I was going to Do. I knew this to mean that I had got to do Something. Out of sheer desperation I answered the advertisement of a private schoolmaster who wanted an usher whose remuneration was fixed at board, lodging, washing, and the munificent sum of twelve pounds a year. I got the situation, and with a moment's warning to the people at Highcroft set off to one of the most desolate towns on the Border, which may I never set foot in again as long as I live. If there be any of you who ever have the opportunity of doing some small kindness to an usher, or, as they call them nowadays, under-masters, in a pettifogging private school—vile, worthless, useless institutions which any self-respecting community would sweep away together with their effete, ignorant

proprietors!—do it, for there is no poorer worm anywhere.

I spent three months of misery in this place. The man was a conceited fool; his wife was a colourless nonentity; the pupils were thick-headed dolts whose sole concern was to learn sufficient to prevent themselves from being cheated when they got into the places for which they were intended—the clerk's office and the tradesman's shop. What a hell! And yet—all round this sordid little town was a land full of romance and poetry.

I had but one friend in that place—an eccentric character who had known Wordsworth. He asked me one day why I did not go to London and try my luck there. I replied that I would if I had the money to go with. Thereupon he pulled out an old purse, bade me help myself to its contents, and to go at once. Next day, late in a late spring evening, I found myself in Fleet Street, staring, wide-eyed, at the dome of St. Paul's.

CHAPTER X.

LONDON.

I HAD been so quick to follow the advice of my eccentric and kind friend that it had not occurred to me that I ought to have communicated my new intentions to the people at Highcroft Farm, and also to Mrs. Winterbee, before proceeding to carry them out. Perhaps I was somewhat conscious that if I let them know what it was that I meant to do they would never have let me do it. At any rate, I was safely housed in a small hotel in a quiet street on the south side of the Strand before I wrote to Wintersleave and to Kingsport announcing my determination to make my own way in future and to make it in London. I awaited the replies to these letters with some speculation, but with no anxiety. Whatever lay before me in the great city to which I had come with all the eagerness and enthusiasm of youth could not possibly be worse than what I had left behind in the little Border town. I had had enough of uncongenial work and uncongenial surroundings—in future, if I starved for it, I would work in my own way.

The letters from my relatives were characteristic of their writers. It turned out that the man who had given me employment as mere drudge in his miserable school had written to my friends complaining of the cavalier way in which I had treated him. He said I was ungrateful to him and his wife for a multitude of kindnesses—a fine piece of imagination which gave him a certain redeeming quality in my eyes.

He further complained that my sudden departure had caused him great inconvenience; this statement, knowing all the facts of the case, I estimated at its true value. The pith of his letter was that as I had voluntarily departed, the small amount of salary due to me might well be left in his hands as compensation for the injury I had done him. He omitted to say that I had never been properly fed or lodged, and that he had greatly exaggerated the importance of his establishment. But his letter had evidently given much pleasure to Uncle Benjamin, who wrote to the effect that I was a worthless young fool, of whom he washed his hands for ever, and intimated that he had now fallen out with me for good, and that when I got into trouble, as he prophesied I soon should, I was not to turn to him for help. That, of course, was precisely what I expected from Uncle Benjamin. Aunt Sophia's letter, too, was in accordance with my expectations. She said that Mr. Winterbee and herself did not approve of young people doing as they pleased, and observed that it had always been her intention that I should follow the chemist and druggist line of business. As I had deliberately chosen to forsake that promising career, she had nothing more to say except that she hoped I should not live to regret it.

I turned from these two missives to one addressed to me in Aunt Caroline's fine Italian handwriting. Within the envelope were two letters—and a crisp Bank of England note for five pounds. One letter was from Aunt Frances—she was mainly anxious about my bodily welfare, and said much on the subjects of lodgings, well-aired beds, and food; the other, from Aunt Caroline, was full of equally good

advice and of warm wishes for success in whatever it was that I was going to do. But neither she nor Aunt Frances seemed to have the slightest notion of what that was. They counselled me earnestly to go to Uncle Richard at once. That I had determined I would not do until I had found some means of supporting myself. I was not going to seek or take aid from anyone that I did not give some adequate return for. I had had no idea of where I was going when I left the railway station—I came across the quiet little hotel by mere chance, and finding that it was cheap, had my things conveyed there. It and its surroundings have disappeared long since—it must have been one of the last of those gloomy little places characterised by a coffee-room furnished with horse-hair-upholstered mahogany and decorated with heavily-framed prints of the Royal Family, by a perpetual smell of chops, steaks, and fried fish, and by the presence of an old-fashioned waiter, whose chief business seemed to lie in flopping flies out of the sugar-basin with a very dingy napkin. Myself, two old ladies with corkscrew curls and red noses, and an old clergyman in a rusty clerical suit and a dirty neckcloth, who carried a bottle of Indian pickles in his coat-tail pocket and once forgot himself so far as to swear at an underdone chop, were the only inhabitants of this caravanserai that I ever saw during my stay there, except for the ancient waiter, a pert housemaid, who seemed to consider me quite a small boy, and the proprietress, a buxom lady in cap and ribbons, who obligingly offered to lock my money up in her safe, and told me every morning to take care that I did not lose my watch and chain, London being, she said, the worst place in the world.

Worst place or best place, I did my best to make myself acquainted with it as quickly as possible. I had possessed a map of London for years, and had studied it so regularly and with such application that it had become fixed in my mind. During my first two or three days in the metropolis, I wandered about in all directions, visiting districts and places which I had long desired to set eyes on, and I never once asked my way. And I had read so much, thought so much of these things, of the historic houses, streets, churches, monuments, that when I saw them they seemed like old friends. I was at home at once.

Cheap as the little, stuffy hotel, with its perpetual odour of mutton chops, was, I knew that it would never do for me to stay there, and at the end of four days I found a lodging for myself. It was a small room at the very top of a house in one of the main streets in Islington. Downstairs, on the street-level, the proprietress of the house kept a newsagent's shop, to which was attached a lending library, chiefly remarkable for shelves full of novels in three volumes. The proprietress was an old lady of sixty, who was so thin and attenuated that she always reminded me of a bird which has been almost starved to death and has become a mere framework. She wore gigantic caps of sombre black, from beneath which peered out a pair of sharp, bead-like black eyes, a very big, beak-like nose, and a long, pointed chin; her hands, claw-like in their thinness, were always encased in black thread mittens; her elbows were so sharp that I used to wonder what would happen if she ever, out of sheer pleasantry, dug anybody in the ribs with them. As a contrast to herself, she

possessed a daughter, Arabella, who was as heavy and somnolent as her mother was light and wide-awake. It was Arabella's walk in life to attend to the shop and the library. She was fairly awake in the morning, when regular customers dropped in for their papers, but she slept much over the three-volume novels during the greater part of the afternoon, and if you went into the shop in quiet moments you would be sure to find her nodding in an easy chair behind the counter and usually snoring in a fine, deep bass. She confided to me once that she had read so many three-volumers, as she called them, that they had palled upon her, and her sole desire by that time was to encounter something in the way of a new sensation. Unfortunately new sensations were few—until they came along Arabella was content to sleep and to grow fat.

I bestowed my books and belongings in my elevated chamber, arranged a table for writing purposes beneath my window, laid in a stock of manuscript paper, a sheaf of penholders, and a box of pens, and plunged into business. Being about as ignorant of exactly how to make a living by writing as I was of how to mix drugs, I naturally thought that I was going to earn it straight off, and that within six months I should have made a name. I had some opinion of my own talent, and an almost fatuous belief in the readiness of publishers and editors to greet a new writer with enthusiasm and generosity. In short, I really had an impression that I should sell off my little stock-in-trade without difficulty, and be asked to replenish it for willing customers.

That stock-in-trade consisted of my cherished poem, a collection of fugitive pieces, and a number of

productions which I then dignified by the title of historical essays. So far as I remember them, they were written in imitation of Lord Macaulay, and dealt with some highly dramatic situations in English history, such as the Last Days of Cardinal Wolsey, the Execution of Lady Jane Grey, the Trial and Death of Charles the First, the Shameful Flight of Lord Chancellor Jeffreys, and the like. They were all very high-flown, very rhetorical, very full of imagery, and, I am afraid, somewhat designed to show their writer's learning. And as one candid person to whom I showed them said, they were all very well as school exercises, but as various historians of some note had already dealt with each subject, it was scarcely probable that I should find a place for them in the high-class magazines and weekly sixpennies in which I had fondly hoped to see them in all the glory of large type.

I had no better luck with my poem—in spite of the fragrance which Andalusia breathed through it. I submitted a beautiful copy of it, inscribed on glazed paper and tied up with scarlet ribbon, to a famous firm of publishers, and was considerably surprised to find that their opinion of its merits was not in accordance with mine. I was still more surprised to find that other publishers agreed with their opinion. Poetry, indeed, seemed to be as a drug in the market. I did certainly receive some encouragement from one well-known firm. Its senior partner wrote a charming letter to me, and even went so far as to say that my poem reminded him of Browning's "Pauline," and that his firm would be glad to have their name associated with it. Quite at the end of a long and friendly letter, he mentioned that they would print

the poem in the best style, on hand-made paper, and bind it in half-vellum, and if I would forward my cheque for sixty pounds the printing should be proceeded with at once.

As I was then coming within sighting distance of my last sixty pence—figuratively—I declined this generous offer, and asked its makers to give me ten pounds for the copyright of my masterpiece. Their only reply was to return the be-ribboned manuscript, which I forthwith immured in my trunk. It was plain that poets were not much wanted in London, nor writers of historical essays written in glowing phraseology. What then was I to do?—how earn a living? What a problem!

I was nearly at the end of my five-pound note when I got the chance of earning a modest—very modest—penny.

Wandering one day about the purlieus of Paternoster Row, I came upon a little office, of very unpretentious appearance, over the window of which was painted a name that seemed unusually familiar to me. It flared itself forth in big gold letters on a black ground, lighting up the narrow court with its insistent glitter. I repeated it over to myself again and again—Jabez Drake!—Jabez Drake!—Jabez Drake! Where had I known a Jabez Drake? It was not until I had stared at the heavy, shining letters for a full minute that I remembered things. There had been a master of that name at Wethercote when I was there. Could this be he?

I crossed the little court—it was scarcely bigger than an ordinary sized parlour—and examined the contents of the window. Jabez Drake appeared to be a publisher of educational works intended for

elementary schools—the shelves in the window displayed arithmetics, geographies, grammars, copy-books, and the like. And then I remembered that the Mr. Drake of Wethercote had written an arithmetic and was sore displeased because the head master would not adopt it instead of Barnard Smith. It must be the same man. Anyway, I would soon find out.

I had gone to the expense of having some cards engraved, and I took one out of my case, entered the office, laid it on the counter, and asked the clerk who picked it up if I could see Mr. Drake. While he went to some region in the recesses of the place I looked round me. The office was unornamental enough—a bare, colour-washed, shed-like affair, with plain wood shelving round the walls—a mere packing and distributing shop. There was a young man writing at a sort of cashier's desk near the door, and a boy who was lazily licking stamps and affixing them to letters and parcels behind the counter; these two and the clerk who had carried away my card appeared to constitute the entire staff of the establishment. As for the rest, I was particularly conscious that the atmosphere was made up of the smell of newly-printed and newly-bound books, and of what appeared to be a considerable escape of gas. Then I noticed that the place was so hemmed in by high walls that it was necessary to keep the gas lighted. I sniffed the mingled odour of paste and glue and gas, and thought of the Ten-Acre at Wintersleave.

The clerk came back, opened a door in a screen which divided the office into two halves, and motioning me to pass through it, conducted me in silence to another door far away at the rear. This was

marked "Private"; beyond it, in a small glass tank, just big enough to contain himself, a writing table, a chair, a book-case, and a map of England and Wales, I found Mr. Jabez Drake, and recognised him at once as my old master at Wethercote.

Mr. Drake appeared to be in a flourishing condition. I remembered him at Wethercote as a rather untidy young man, with a shock of black hair and unbrushed clothes; here he was in broadcloth and glossy linen, a gold chain across his waistcoat, his hair oiled and trimmed, his face plump with good living. A very shiny silk hat, high of crown and wide of brim, stood on a pile of papers at his elbow; a gold-mounted umbrella reposed against the writing-table. And on the little finger of the hand which Mr. Drake stretched out to me, glistened a large diamond, set in a massive gold ring.

"God bless me, Emery!" said Mr. Drake, shaking me heartily by the hand. "So it is you, is it? Upon my word, I thought it might be—though it's nearly seven years since you were in my form at Wethercote, isn't it? Ah, there's a good deal of water run under London Bridge since then! But sit down, Emery, sit down."

This was a very cordial reception. I sat down, and asked Mr. Drake how he was. Mr. Drake pulled down his waistcoat, shot out his shirt cuffs, flashed his diamond ring, and said he was very well. Then, such a question being more to the point, he asked me how I was, and what I was doing there, and what I had been doing since I left Wethercote so suddenly. And there being no reason why I should not open my heart to him, I gave Mr. Drake a full and particular answer to these questions. After all,

he was the first person I had met in London who could be called an old acquaintance.

Mr. Drake listened in silence, his thumbs stuck in the armpits of his waistcoat, his eyes fixed intently upon me. I noticed that he examined my outward appearance very carefully, and I was glad that I had good, and even smart clothes and linen. If I had been in aught else—well, God help those of the clouted shoe!

"So you want to write, do you, Emery?" said Mr. Drake. "Ah! you'll find it hard work to get a living here in that way. If you knew as many cases as I do of men who came to town with the finest equipment and couldn't get butter to their bread, you'd pause before entering on a career like that. Poetry, of course, is neither here nor there; nobody wants it. You haven't any of those historical things that you spoke of in your pocket, have you?"

I had the manuscripts of two or three of the historical things in my pocket, and I handed them over to Mr. Drake. He looked them through, read a page here and there, and laid them on his desk.

"I don't know whether I couldn't give you some work, Emery," he said. "Of course, you know, you're quite inexperienced, but I think perhaps you might do what I want doing. Now, do you think you could compile or write a historical reader?—something in this way, you know," he continued, tapping my manuscripts. "Something that would do for the sixth and seventh standards, eh? Big scenes in English history, with plenty of splash and dash about them that would interest boys. Eh?"

"I am sure I could do that," I replied readily.

"Then there are two other little matters which

you might perhaps undertake," he went on. " You've read a lot in your time—couldn't you compile a poetry reader—extracts from the best poets, you know—Shakespeare, and Milton, and Wordsworth—any big man whose stuff isn't copyright? And I want a companion prose reader—gems from the best prose authors—Addison, and Bacon, and, er——"

" Johnson, and Goldsmith, and Gibbon, and Burke, and Sterne, and Swift, and Steele, and Pepys, and Evelyn, and Fuller, and Jeremy Taylor, and Hooker, and Raleigh, and Ascham," I suggested. " And you might go back to Sir Thomas Malory and Sir John Mandeville—I could render them in modern English. And——"

" Just so, just so!" he said, interrupting me. " I see you know all about it, Emery. Well, now, I'll tell you what I think you'd better do. You'd better come and work here—I'll have a table fitted up for you in the inside shop there—and when you want to refer to anything in the way of books, as you will, you can step along to the British Museum—I'll get you a reader's ticket. And you'll not object to giving some assistance when you're wanted—writing a few letters for me now and then, and correcting proofs, for instance?—excellent practice and training for you, you know, Emery."

" No, I should not object to that," I said. " I corrected all Mr. Langton's proofs for him."

" Then I'll tell you what!" exclaimed Mr. Drake, with a burst of palpable generosity. " I'll tell you what, Emery—I'll say a bit more than I could afford to offer anybody else. We'll say a guinea a week, and the hours only nine to six. That'll leave you your evenings to yourself if you want to do a little

work on your own account. And, mind you, Emery, that's an offer I wouldn't make to anybody in London but you."

I made no immediate answer to this.

"Well, what do you say?" asked Mr. Drake presently. "That's a generous, a very generous offer!"

"I was wondering if I could live on a guinea a week," I replied.

"Live on a guinea a week! Live on a—God bless me!" exclaimed Mr. Drake in genuine surprise. "I should think so! Why, there's my manager outside there—sharp young fellow he is, who came to me as office boy—he only gets twenty-five shillings a week, and he's saving, Emery, saving. Live on a guinea a week—live on fifty-four pounds twelve shillings a year? I should say so!"

"Very well, Mr. Drake," I answered. "I will accept your offer. When shall I begin my work?"

"Why, Emery," said he, "as you'll have a good deal to learn I think you'd better come as soon as you can—to-morrow, eh? And—and if you'd like a week's wages in advance, why——"

He put his hand in his pocket and jingled some loose coins. I thanked him, and replied that I did not need any money just then. He seemed pleased to hear that, and taking me out to what he called the front shop, he introduced me to his manager, who appeared to be little older than myself, and gave him instructions that I should be accommodated at a table placed just outside his own glass tank. That done, I shook hands with him and his manager, and went back to my lodging, whence I immediately sent forth my news to Wintersleave and to Kingsport. After that, being anxious, in an enthusiastically juvenile

way, to get to work at once, even in my own time, I spent the evening in sketching out the plans of the historical reader, the poetry reader, and the prose reader.

I entered on my duties at the Drake establishment next morning. At the table outside the glass tank I spent a considerable portion of the next two years. I appeared to graduate very rapidly. Within a week of my arrival I was empowered to open all the letters, to sort them out for Mr. Drake or his manager, and later in the day to answer them. Within a fortnight I was graciously permitted to carry all the cheques, money orders, and cash to the bank, and to draw cheques for Mr. Drake's signature. Within a month I had full charge of all the literary department of the business—not a very onerous task mentally, as it only involved the reading of proofs, but a tiring one physically, because of constant pilgrimages to the printers, who would make fearful mistakes in arithmetical and mathematical books. Sandwiched in amongst all these things were my compilations—I earned my guinea a week honestly and well.

On the first Saturday that found me in possession of this weekly stipend, I set out for Uncle Richard's house in Bloomsbury. He lived in a corner house in Keppel Street—I knew exactly where it was before coming to London, and since my arrival had more than once walked past it after nightfall, always with a longing to see Uncle Richard and Sylvia. Now that I was earning my own living and felt independent I walked boldly up the steps, and played a loud tune on the knocker.

The door was opened by Sylvia herself. For a

moment we stood staring at each other—until then I had not realised that nearly six years had passed since her visit to Wintersleave, and that I myself must also have changed, as she had. She had grown—but not much—she had taken up her hair, she had lengthened her frocks. But she was still the same Sylvia of the mobile mouth and big eyes, and her nose was still the same rather inquisitive snub, and there were the same freckles. It was an honest, clever little face—but it was now a woman's face. And yet, as I knew, Sylvia was not yet nineteen.

I think that at first she did not know me, but presently the colour came flooding into her cheeks, and she smiled and held out her hands with a little laugh of pleasure that was almost childish in its genuineness. And then we were within the house, laughing and talking of a hundred things at once, and before five minutes were over she knew of my magnificent engagement at the Drake establishment, and I had learnt that she was now studying at a famous dramatic school, and was hoping, within the next few months, to make her appearance in a small part at the Athenæum, under its famous actor-manager, Mr. Courtney, who was a great friend of Uncle Richard's, and had always taken an interest in her. So there we both were, each full of ambition, fairly plunged into the first small waves of life's sea, each certain that we were going to do something some day.

"And where is Uncle Richard?" I inquired, looking about me at the room in which we sat. "I want to see him so much."

Sylvia's face clouded a little, and her eyes grew troubled.

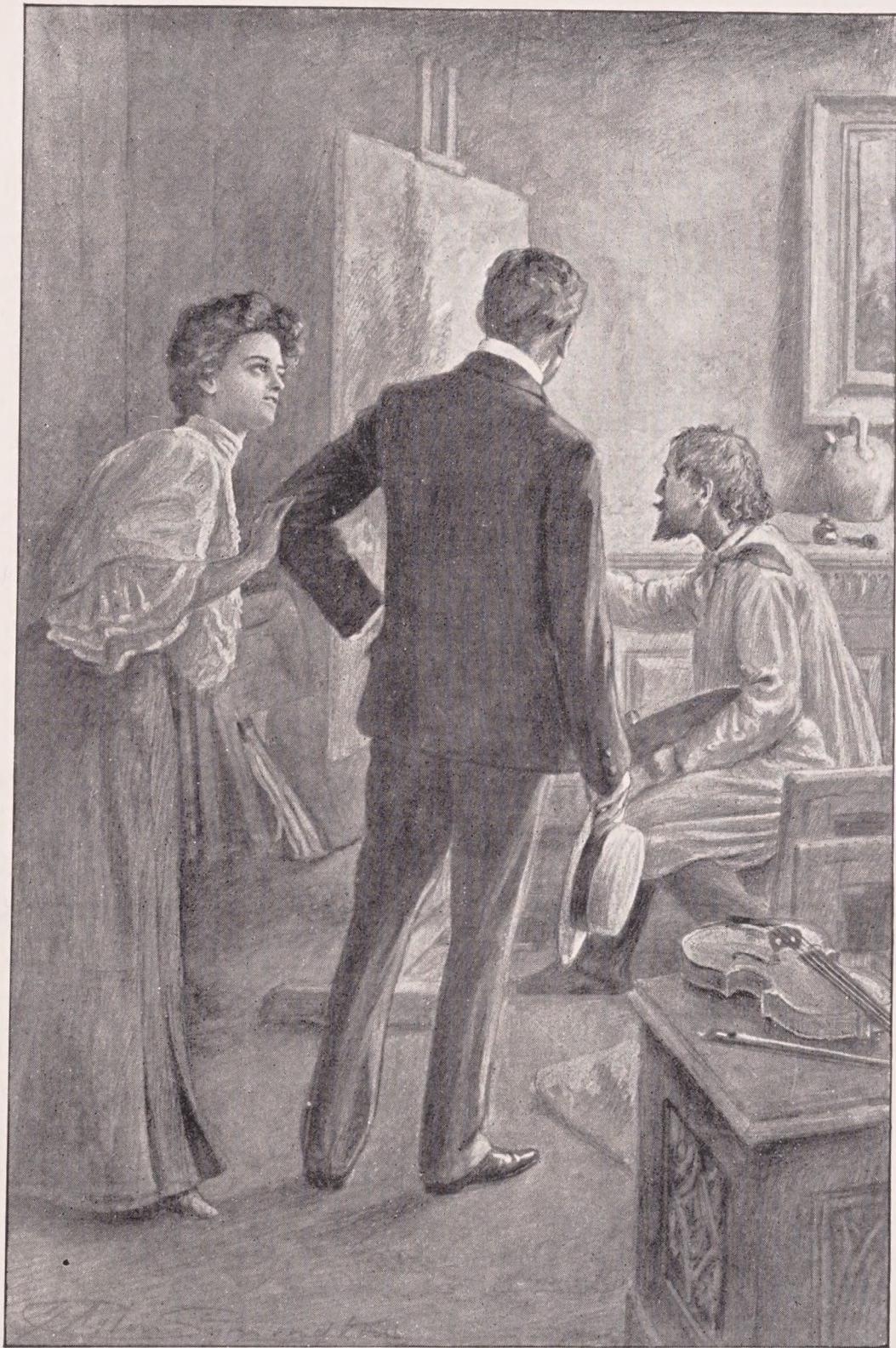
"I'm bothered about Dick, Gerard," she answered.

"Something has worried him lately—I'm certain of it. Indeed, every now and then during the past few years there has been a time when he has seemed very much worried and harassed and perplexed. I believe it began when we left Highcroft Farm so suddenly—you remember?"

"Yes; I remember very well," I replied. "I have often wondered why he hurried away as he did."

"He had some trouble to deal with just then, I am sure," she said. "The day after we got back to town he sent Margaret and myself away to the seaside for three weeks—at least, it was three weeks before he let us return. And I was sure that in the meantime he had gone through trouble of some sort. And since then there have been times—I always connect them with letters which he gets from abroad—what they are about, or whom they come from I don't know, of course, though I do know that they are all from Ceylon; but he is always worried and bothered for days after their arrival. He's like that just now—there was a letter a week ago. Since he got it he has been painting almost day and night, and has refused to see anybody. But he will see you, Gerard. Don't mind if he seems—grumpy."

Uncle Richard, discovered in his studio, a great workshop-like place at the back of the house, was distinctly grumpy. He looked stranger than ever—his hair was longer and more grizzled, and in a hopeless tangle about his eyes and his neck; he wore a canvas overall, which was plentifully bespattered with paint; one end of an enormous yellow tie had come loose and was thrown over his shoulder. He greeted me with a grunt, and went on painting for five minutes before he asked me how I was.



"'TALK TO HIM,' WHISPERED SYLVIA."

(p. 169.)

"Talk to him," whispered Sylvia.

Thus counselled, I gave Uncle Richard an outline of my recent adventures. He listened in silence, giving no sign, until I mentioned that I was earning a guinea a week, whereupon he remarked gruffly that he would have sold his grandmother for a guinea a week, paid regularly, when he first came to London, and that I was fortunate to get something to do so quickly. Then he asked me if I would like to come and live with him and Sylvia, and remarked that he believed there were more bedrooms in the house than they used. But I thanked him, and said that for the present I would stay where I was, whereupon he bade me come to dinner every Sunday, and to use the house every evening as if it were my own—I should always find Sylvia there, he said, and sometimes himself. Then Sylvia took me off, and we left Uncle Richard growling because he could not get some desired effect upon his canvas.

Sylvia showed me over the house—everything in it was quaint and queer, and to me suggestive of those old furniture and curiosity shops wherein oddments are gathered together from all parts of the world. There was tapestry, and old china, and old silver and pewter, and old oak—everything was old. It seemed to me somewhat gloomy, and I asked Sylvia if she did not find it dull. She answered that she never had time to feel dull, and indeed, as I soon discovered, she was one of the hardest-working creatures one could meet in a lifetime.

After this visit to the house in Keppel Street, I settled down to a well-ordered, regular existence. Every day I walked to and from my lodging to the office; all day I toiled steadily at whatever there was

to do, varying the office work by excursions to the British Museum and the printers. Three or four nights a week I used to go to Keppel Street—Uncle Richard was usually at his club, and Sylvia was always very glad to see me. And one night I read her my poem, of which I was now beginning to be a bit doubtful. She laughed at most of it, and finally pronounced it to be sentimental rubbish. So we tore it up, and burnt it in the studio fire.

It was about this time that I made my first acquaintance with the stage. Oddly enough, it was Mr. Winterbee who first took me into a theatre. He came to town, invited me to dine with him, and suggested, with many winks and nods, that we should go to the play. We went to see Mr. Irving in *The Cup* and *The Belle's Stratagem* that night; the next night we went to the Gaiety and saw Nelly Farren and Edward Terry and the other bright particular stars of the very early 'eighties; and on the third night we might have been found in the stalls at the Alhambra, and afterwards at supper in a little French café-restaurant in Leicester Square. Mr. Winterbee enjoyed himself.

"But you mustn't let your aunts know, you know, Gerard," he said, with many winks and contortions. "Good women, your aunts, good women, but a lee-ee-tle particular, you know—don't approve of the theatre, your aunts, none of 'em. Never been in a theatre in their lives, you know. Fact, I assure you!"

CHAPTER XI.

THE FIRST STEPS.

ALTHOUGH I had burnt the poem of which I had once cherished such fond hopes, I had by no means abandoned the idea of becoming an author of some reputation, and in my spare time I devoted myself to two projects which I had much at heart. Naturally they were of a very ambitious nature. One was an epic, dealing with the life, adventures, and death of Hereward the Wake, a hero who had fired me with enthusiasm ever since I could read; the other was a History of England during the Civil War. Hereward was to have at least ten thousand lines of the best blank verse devoted to him; the History was to be in three volumes octavo. I calculated that I could finish both by the time I was twenty-five. I should certainly have to work very hard during the intervening six years, but think of my reward at the end! I should leap into fame straight off, and the universities would vie with each other in conferring honorary degrees upon me. So I went on filling notebook after note-book with extracts from all sorts of mouldy, dry-as-dust folios, broadsheets, pamphlets, and what not, dividing my available leisure between this delving into historical quarries and writing very sounding verse about the Last of the English. There have been worse ways of spending a young man's time; it remained for Alexander MacTavish to suggest that mine might be spent much more profitably.

MacTavish came into my life in that casual, drifting fashion which makes us wonder more than anything else if human existence is not in strict reality a narrow sea in which we all drift about without plan or method, knocking against each other at the bidding of some sudden whim of the wind or wave. At the beginning of one week I had no more knowledge of MacTavish than of the Czar of Russia, and not so much, for I did not know of his existence ; at the end of the next, he and I were boon companions, always in each other's company, arguing, disputing, and quarrelling over every subject under the sun.

This is how I came to make his acquaintance. Jabez Drake's business was growing ; he was making money. He was a shrewd person, and knew how to get a good deal for very little. Most of his work was obtained from people who either did not know that it could be turned to excellent profit under his hands, or were so hard up that they were glad to take whatever he offered them ; some of it cost him nothing at all so far as author's or compiler's fees went. As the business grew, we required more help —I was working sometimes until late at night, and even then the work got into arrears. What we particularly needed was a person who could be trusted to deal with our mathematical and scientific textbooks—a sort of walking encyclopædia on those subjects, for which I had no great love. Jabez Drake advertised for such a person. Two or three men of various ages came to the office in answer to the advertisement. None of them were eligible. One was too old ; another was obviously too devoted to gin, in spite of the fact that he had at one time done great things at Cambridge ; a third went off in high

dudgeon on hearing the particulars of his duties and the amount of their remuneration. We had to advertise again.

Into the office one morning walked one of the oddest little figures I have ever set eyes on. At first sight I could not tell if I was looking at an old or a young man. Picture to yourself a diminutive person as slightly formed as a boy of fifteen from his shoulders downward; picture those shoulders, rather rounded and stooping, crowned by an enormous head, of which at least three-quarters was forehead; picture a shock of tow-coloured hair about a very white face, wherein were cavernous eyes shielded by spectacles; picture this figure standing before you in rather a shambling attitude; picture it in a blue tailed-coat, two sizes too large, and in a waistcoat and trousers of shepherd's plaid; picture it holding a broad-brimmed Quaker-like hat in one hand and an umbrella which might have been Mrs. Gamp's in the other; picture the pockets of the blue coat bursting with papers, picture more bundles of papers and a few books and pamphlets under the loose-hanging arms—and there you have Alexander MacTavish. But you have not the thin, tightly-shut mouth, the small nose, the firm, square chin, nor the steady gleam of the steel-blue eyes which were sheltered behind the big, lamp-like spectacles—picture these, and you have him better.

MacTavish secured the situation. After he had gone, Drake, rubbing his hands with great glee, told me that MacTavish was a Master of Arts, a Bachelor of Science, and the possessor of magnificent testimonials. He was, said Drake, still rubbing his hands, the Very Man he wanted. He added that he had

secured Mr. MacTavish at great cost. Then he gave instructions that Mr. MacTavish should be accommodated with a table in close proximity to my own, and, with a final rub of his hands, said that now we should be able to get on.

MacTavish began work next day. He was always a mystery. No one—not even the manager—knew what he was paid. He came to the office at ten o'clock and went away when he had finished his work. If he had finished his work at three he departed; if it was necessary to stay until ten he stayed until ten. He never went out for lunch or dinner; if he became hungry he would despatch the office-boy for a small loaf of bread and a glass of milk, and would eat and drink as he worked. Nobody—not even myself—ever knew where he lived. I once met him crossing Blackfriars Bridge after office hours, and got a notion that he had a lodging down Kensington way. All the time—a whole year—that he remained at Drake's he wore the same clothes in which he had first appeared there, and the same hat, and carried the same umbrella. He always had books under his arms, and papers sticking out of his pockets, and whether he was in the streets or at his table his big spectacles gleamed from under his great, overhanging forehead like the headlights of a ship.

MacTavish and I became good friends. Working side by side we had constant opportunities of conversation. Moreover, there was scarcely a day passed on which we did not visit the printers together, and on the way there and back we used to talk. Sometimes, after we had worked late at the office, we used to walk about the City, which, if people only knew it, is the most delightful part of London, and is full

of quaint nooks and corners wherein one can get a feeling of rest and quietness on summer evenings when the rush and roar of the day has gone by. And now and then we went for long walks into the country on Saturday afternoons, MacTavish clinging fondly to his umbrella, however certain it was that there would be no rain for a week. We used to argue a good deal on these excursions: I as an exponent and champion of High Churchism, High Toryism, and general orthodoxy; MacTavish as an iconoclast in theology, philosophy, and sociology. He appeared to have steeped himself in German metaphysics, and he had such a curious outlook on life that I am not sure that he really believed mathematics to be an exact science.

It was on one of these excursions into the country that MacTavish gave me the benefit of his shrewd, Scottish, common-sense advice, and set me off on a new track. One fine afternoon we walked out through Highgate and Hampstead to the country beyond, and paused to rest in a green meadow where cattle were browsing amongst the gold and white of the buttercups and daisies which besprinkled the thick grass. Something in the scene and in the scent of the hawthorn blossom in the hedgerow beneath which we were sitting made me think of Wintersleave. I began to tell MacTavish about it. And perhaps I got carried away at the thought of the red roofs peeping through the trees, and of the grey tower of the old church, a silent sentinel above the quiet churchyard at its foot, and of the woods and meadows which I loved, and talked more of them than I meant to do; perhaps, too, that led me to thoughts of the village folk and to tell MacTavish

stories of them, of their quaint ways, their odd sayings, their biting Yorkshire wit.

"Man, Emery," said MacTavish suddenly, "I'm thinking ye're a daft gowk."

I turned and stared at him. He had pushed his queer old hat far back on his head, and he was digging holes in the turf with the ferrule of the Gamp-like umbrella. An enigmatical smile played about the corners of his mouth; the big spectacles gleamed as if well lighted from behind.

"Aye!" he repeated, before I could ask him what he meant. "Ye're just a daft gowk, Emery."

"And what's that mean, MacTavish?" I asked.

"Who but a silly, feckless loon like yersel' would be wasting his talents on dust and ashes when he could be turning them to good account?" he said quietly. "Man! do you not see that you've got a rare gift of description, and are a born teller of tales? If you'd been an Eastern you'd have sat in the bazaar with a circle of listeners round you that wouldn't easily have left you. And there ye are wasting your time on epic poetry and unreliable history! I'm wondering at you, Emery."

"What do you mean by unreliable history, MacTavish?" I demanded angrily. "How do you know that it——"

"Man! ye couldn't write reliable history if it was to save your life," he answered in his imperturbable fashion. "I'm no denying that ye could write an entertaining historical narrative, but indeed I've no doubt that there'd be as much fiction as fact in it. You've not got the true historian's mind, Emery, man —ye're a partisan. Ye'd be for calling Charles Stuart the Martyr King. Ye're biassed"

"King Charles the First——" I began. "King Charles——"

"That's neither here nor there," he said, brushing me aside. "I'm saying ye'll never make any hand at writing real history till ye're a good forty years older, and maybe not then. History!—man, ye'd turn it into a romance! Ye're just a sentimental, emotional, enthusiastic young dreamer—ye'd be for having the crowd weep over a kerchief or two dipped in the Man's bluid. Ye've read too much Macaulay to make a historian, Emery."

"Lord Macaulay, at any rate, was——" I began.

"Hoots-toots!" said MacTavish. "Haven't I read the man's account of the death of William of Orange, and isn't it the hand of the novel writer? Ye want a scientist, with a heart as cold as a fish, to write history, man—ye can't write history if ye're taking sides."

"I don't agree with you, MacTavish," I said.
"Your argument——"

But he interrupted me as unceremoniously as before.

"And ye're wasting time, Emery, on your epic," said he. "Man! the piecing together of a few thousands of lines of blank verse no entitles you to call yourself a poet. There's more real poetry in Robbie Burns's lines to Mary in Heaven than in your John Milton's tiresome 'Paradise Lost.' The real stuff comes, man Emery—it's no manufactured."

"You're a real Radical, MacTavish!" I said, perhaps a little sardonically.

"No; but I'm telling you the truth, man," he answered earnestly. "Ye're just wasting your time over your histories and your epics. You that could

be making a name—and money—for yourself if you would!"

"What on earth do you mean, MacTavish?" I cried. "You're in your most enigmatical mood this afternoon."

"You're wanting to write, to make a name as a writer, to earn a living as a writer," he said slowly. "And you have it in you to do all that if you'd just be a wise laddie and find your proper sphere and get a sense of your limitations. There's everything in finding your limitations, Emery. Everything! Find out what you can't do, and you'll never try to do it."

"I don't understand you even now, MacTavish," I said.

"You were telling me just now of the old village, and the people, and their sayings and doings," he said. "Man! did it never strike you that instead of grubbing about in old books you would be better employed in writing about the folk you know and love? That tale you were telling me of the rustic who was ten years making up his mind whether he would marry or not, and got left in the end—eh, man, there's many an editor body that would give ye golden guineas for that. And that's just where it is; you've a gold mine at your feet, laddie, and you'll no step down into it."

"But—but, MacTavish!" I exclaimed, "do you think really that anybody wants to read—that sort of thing? Just about poor country folk?"

"Poor country folk are as full of interest as rich town folk, Emery, my man," said he. "And you've the chance of writing about them in the right way, because you know them. Write out your stories just as you were telling them to me, and I'll swallow Ailsa

Craig if somebody doesn't print them and ask for more. Put your epic and your history on the fire, man, and gi' us some good countryside cracks!"

I thought over MacTavish's advice as I sat in my room that evening. Oh, my poor Hereward!—now several hundred lines in length—oh, my poor history, in which I was going to prove that Charles the First was the most just monarch that ever ruled England! Was I really well-advised by that tow-headed Scotsman who hadn't a scrap of sentiment in his big brain or his little body? I had meant to gain such fame by you—and, incidentally, quite a respectable amount of money.

I began to wonder if I really could write some stories and sketches of country life as I had known it at Wintersleave.

After a while I got out pen and ink and paper. I wrote down my recollections of a conversation I had once heard in the Crown and Cushion at Wintersleave on the eve of an election. It had struck me as being irresistibly funny at the time, and had fixed itself firmly in my memory. Now, as I reconstructed it on paper, I found myself laughing at the familiar Yorkshire dialect and at my recollections of the familiar scene in the parlour of the old inn. But when I had finished it I was filled with vague doubts which amounted almost to despair—would anybody really care for this transcript of the sayings and doings of a parcel of rustics sitting over their pots of ale in a Yorkshire tavern; would other people see the queer humour in these sayings which I saw? I racked my brains to think of any newspaper which printed anything of that sort, and could recollect none. No, in spite of MacTavish and his prophecies I could

scarcely believe that chronicles of poor and simple folk were wanted by the mighty autocrats who sat in editorial chairs.

I said nothing to MacTavish of my little sketch, and it was without the slightest belief in its chances of acceptance that I addressed it to the editor of my favourite newspaper. And, strange as it may seem, I had forgotten all about it by next morning—possibly because of a more than usually hard day's work which sent me home dog-tired. But that next morning! Shall I ever forget it? Does a mother ever forget the birth of her first-born?

It was my custom every morning to drop in at the little newsagent's shop over which I lodged in order to buy my paper, and Arabella always had it folded in readiness for me. I invariably opened it in the shop, and glanced over its contents. On that particular morning I followed my usual custom—I was anxious, I remember, to know the result of a certain cricket match. And as I turned over the crisp, crackling pages the world suddenly stood still, and my head swam, and for what seemed an eternity I knew no more.

According to Arabella—who thought I was “took with something”—I sat down suddenly in the nearest chair, opened my mouth to its full extent, stared at something in the paper as if it were a ghost, turned white and red and white again, burst out into loud laughter, and, leaping to my feet, executed a sort of war-dance. It was at the end of this that I came to myself. I stared at the newspaper again—could I really believe my senses? I thrust the page within two inches of Arabella's sleepy eyes.

“Arabella! Arabella!” I cried. “Look at that—

read it—read it out loud. What does it say, Arabella—quick!"

"Lor', how you did frighten me!" said Arabella. "I thought you was in a fit, you was took that sudden. You——"

"Read, read, Arabella!" I implored her. "Read—that. Say it!"

"I don't see nothink partic'lar," said Arabella grumblingly. "That there—oh, why it says 'Village Politics, by Gerard Emery.' Sime nime as yours, ain't it? Some feller wots bin a-writin' a piece to the noospaper, eh?"

"It's me, Arabella—me!" I said. "I wrote that—I!"

"Oh, you're a-goin' in for that line, are yer?" remarked Arabella. "I've heard as how there is some think to be mide out of it. My friend's young man, he does pieces for the noospapers—he done a lovely piece about that there murder in 'Oxton the other week; read beautiful, it did. What's this here about —politics? I don't know nothink about them—I like something with a bit of life in it."

I purchased half-a-dozen copies of the newspaper, marked my article with a blue pencil, and, going to the nearest post-office, despatched the copies to my friends. This made me late—instead of walking to the office I had to get into an omnibus. By some marvellous chance the man who sat next to me was reading the newspaper in which my article appeared. After a time it caught his eye—he began to read it. Presently he smiled, then he laughed—actually laughed. And when he had finished it he laughed again—the laugh of satisfaction—and handed the paper to a man who sat opposite, tapping my article

with his forefinger as he did so. The thought came to me—how many more readers had laughed, were laughing, or would laugh over my article? Dear me! I had quite suddenly become—well, a little famous. I felt very proud indeed when I left the omnibus. I should have liked to shake hands with the man who laughed—he was my first known reader. Alas! I never saw him again.

MacTavish received my news with characteristic coolness. He did not even remind me that he had “told me so.” In the exuberance of my delight I invited him to dine with me that day—we would go, I said, to a real tip-top restaurant and have a feast. MacTavish replied that he would not ruin his digestion for all the articles or stories or books that were ever written, and declined my invitation, but added that if I liked to treat him to a glass of Scotch whisky after office hours were over he would drink my health. We went to the Cock, up Fleet Street, that evening; MacTavish drank three glasses of Scotch whisky and I drank two. I shook hands over and over again with him during the evening, and told him that he was the most discerning man it had ever been my fortune to meet. I said that he was like the man who knocks away the last stays and blocks of the newly-builded ship and lets it plunge into the sea; and, a little later, in the middle of the second glass of whisky, declared that he was comparable to a far-seeing prospector, who knows where diamonds lie hidden in the rough earth, and scents them from afar off as pigs scent acorns in autumn. And much more to the same effect, all of which MacTavish accepted in his usual grave fashion, and with his usual inscrutable smile.

When I got to my lodging that night I found two letters. One, bearing the name of the newspaper with which I was now identified, I opened at once. Joy and rapture!—it was from the editor. He said that he and his colleagues had much appreciated my sketch of rustic life, that he thought I might work that vein still further, and that he would be very pleased to receive more articles of the same sort from me. He added, worthy man, that he should be pleased to remunerate me at the rate of two guineas per article if that would be agreeable to my wishes. If I had not known that Arabella and her mother were sleeping somewhere beneath me, I should have danced another jig. Two guineas for writing a little article—two guineas for an hour's work! I saw myself shaking the dust of Drake's dingy establishment off my feet; I saw myself a millionaire.

The other letter was from Sylvia—full of warm congratulations. Uncle Richard had laughed over the article as he had not laughed for months—nay, for years. And I was to be sure to call next day, for she had news for me which would make me as happy as my good news had made her. I was in the mood for good news—if it had not been so late I should have set off for Keppel Street there and then. And next day, having an engagement at the British Museum, I made it of such a convenient nature that I was able to walk into Uncle Richard's dining-room just as he and Sylvia were sitting down to lunch.

I had never seen Uncle Richard in such good spirits—not even at the time of our holiday tramp in Yorkshire. He insisted on having champagne; it was not every day, he said, that two young people met together with the first flush of success upon their

foreheads, and we must celebrate the occasion in a fitting manner.

"But I have not made any success yet, Dick," objected Sylvia. "Why not wait until I have? Perhaps—who knows?—I shall be a dead failure."

Uncle Richard waved that idea away with a magnificent gesture. The word failure was not in his vocabulary. He prophesied that Sylvia would leap upon at any rate one of the lower slopes of the Hill of Fame at a bound. That, he continued, was certain. She was one of those fortunate mortals to whom things Come Easy.

"The big thing," he continued, waxing serious, "is to Improve. Lord!—the scores of men and women I have seen who hit the bull's-eye at their first shot and could never get near it again! No; some people—Sylvia is one of them—have a natural aptitude which makes it easy for them to do things without apparent effort which other people could only do by long years of study and painstaking. The big trial for such people as you are, Sylvia, my child, is the improving upon yourself."

"I will worry my own and everybody else's life out until I do," she said. "And I am not afraid."

"No," said Uncle Richard; "you have the enviable faculty of never being afraid. It is half the battle."

Sylvia had already told me her news—had told me it at the door, before I had done more than get one step across the threshold. Mr. Courtney, of the Athenæum, who had always held a great opinion of her powers, was going to revive *The School for Scandal*, and had given her the part of Maria, declaring that she was made for it. It was to be

produced a month hence—she wondered if the month would ever pass!

They wanted to know what had turned me from my epic and my history to the study—or, rather, the reminiscences—of things Arcadian. I told them of MacTavish and his advice. Uncle Richard clapped me on the shoulder.

"Good boy—good boy!" he said. "Next to the giving of good advice ranks the ready taking of it. He's sense and penetration, this tow-headed young Scot. I must see him. 'That is best which lieth nearest—shape from that thy work of Art.' You'll be more at home, my boy, with the sights and sounds of country life and with Daphne and Chloe, and Strephon and Amaryllis, the parish pump and the ale-house parlour than with Hereward or his Sacred Majesty King Charles the First. You should feel a debt of gratitude to the MacTavish loon; he's done for you the greatest service one man can do another—put you on the right tack. Sail ahead!"

"Mr. MacTavish," said Sylvia, "must be something like the friend you had, Dick, who poked his walking-stick through your picture and told you to paint cows and haystacks."

"Ah!" said Uncle Richard, "he was the best friend I ever had, that. Poor Chalker! he was a failure himself, but he knew what was true and what false. When I set out, you must know, boy, I had the notion that my *métier* was the painting of allegorical and classical pictures. What time I wasted—what yards, acres, of good canvas I spoiled! At last I got to work on something very Great—at least, I hoped it would be. I used to get weary of it sometimes, and at such times I found some relief—

quite unconsciously, no doubt—in jotting down memories of the old scenes at home—bits of the woods, fields, the old buildings, the little nooks and corners in the lanes. One day in comes old Chalker in his rusty cloak and hat, and picks up a sheaf of these little water-colour sketches. And there and then he jabbed his umbrella through the eye of the principal figure in my allegory, and cursed me for a fool. He was right—quite right," concluded Uncle Richard. "I believe I knew it at the time—anyway, I felt a rare peace and satisfaction in turning to landscape. You see, children, I was at home, I was on safe ground there; there was no fear of getting out of my depth. Take it from me, if you want to be successful in Art, be sincere. Don't attempt what you can't do. And always feel that to do what you Can is your true calling. Don't you, Gerard, try to write about duchesses and Belgravia—your forte is milkmaids and Bullocksmyth. And there's a wider field there, my son, than you'll cover if you live to be ninety."

I began to find that out very soon. At first I had only thought of writing a few sketches of country life as I knew it, and once or twice I had wondered what other subjects I could write about which would attract the notice of my friendly editor. But I presently found that my mind was stocked with all sorts of memories of the old pastoral life at Wintersleave, and that there was scarcely a house, a wood, a hedge-row, a wayside gate in the parish which had not some story of its own. I soon found, too, that these stories and sketches were readily accepted and used. It was a landmark on life's highway when my first editor sent for me, and after saying some complimentary

things about my knowledge of rustic life, told me to go on writing about it until he requested me to stop. I left his room feeling that there was something of a Future for me. And, regarding that as a lucky day, I went home early and wrote the first chapter of a romance wherein I meant to deal with the lives and adventures of certain good folk who were living in the old village at the time of the Civil War.

The night of Sylvia's appearance at the Athenæum came round. For days she had been in a state of quiet determination to do well, which, said Uncle Richard privately to me, would be more trying to her than openly-shown excitement or nervousness. He purposely kept everybody away from her that day, and in the afternoon, after her final rehearsal, took her for a long drive into the country, and looked after her, she said, like a mother. But that was one of Uncle Richard's great qualities. He had the faculty of knowing just how to take care of people in the right way.

MacTavish and I got seats in the front row of the pit; I had never seen him look so spick-and-span before, though the only difference in his attire was that he wore a spotless collar and a new neckcloth with a large cairngorm brooch in it, and had emptied his pockets of their papers. Just before the curtain rose, Uncle Richard, who was in a box, espied us, and sent an attendant to summon us to share it with him. This, however, we politely refused to do. We knew very well that folk who are foolish enough to sit in boxes do not see what the man in the pit sees. Moreover, we were bashful—we had gone there, said MacTavish, to see, not to be seen. No doubt Uncle Richard understood our youthful thoughts; he sent

us another message later on which bade us to be sure to go round to Keppel Street after the play.

Sylvia was a success. She played as if she had been playing all her life. MacTavish, whose ideas of dramatic art were, I am sure, derived much more from extensive reading in the classical authors than from actual experience of modern theatres, said many complimentary things which I could scarcely understand. Indeed, the evening was something of a whirl to me. I found it difficult to realise that the Maria was Sylvia, or that the Charles Surface was Mr. Courtney, whom I had met more than once in Keppel Street, or the Lady Teazle his wife, whom I had also met, and who was somewhat different when seen off the stage.

But it was the real Sylvia—a little pale and tired—whom we found later on amid a circle of Uncle Richard's friends, who were all congratulating, and criticising and talking at the top of their voices. It was some time before I could get to her, and then I could only press her hand and give her my warmest congratulations and say how glad I was.

"And I'm glad, too, Gerard," she said. "One likes to be successful. But I'm most glad because"—she turned and pointed at Uncle Richard, who was gloriously happy—"because of Dick. Look at him; I've made him happy—I!"

CHAPTER XII.

R E - E N C O U N T E R S .

Now that I was beginning to earn a few extra guineas, I decided that I had a right to house myself and my effects somewhat more sumptuously than was possible in a bed-sitting room, and my landlady having what she and Arabella called the drawing-room suite to let at that moment, I took it, and felt as if I had suddenly come into possession of a mansion. The suite consisted of two good-sized rooms, communicating with each other by folding doors; outside the windows of the sitting-room there was a balcony, by stepping on which you could see quite a long way up and down the street. I bought some plants and flowers to stand on the balcony, and at night used to spend at least ten minutes before going to bed in hanging over the railing watching the lights of the cabs flitting here and there like fireflies and in listening to the voices of the people in the street. To possess two rooms and a balcony seemed like taking quite a large slice of the world into possession.

I spent the first few evenings of my abode in this new *pied-à-terre* in arranging my books on shelves which I had employed a neighbouring carpenter to fit up in convenient recesses. When I had made everything snug I invited Uncle Richard and Sylvia to tea. Sylvia thought that I was much too comfortable, and should develop lazy habits—I ought, she said, to have lived in a real garret for at least a year. Uncle Richard made no remarks, but he was greatly.

interested in my landlady's collection of pictures, four in number, two oleographs representing a very scarlet sunrise and an equally gay sunset, and two engravings after Landseer, obviously printed from much worn plates. I could not think what made him examine these things with so much attention, nor why his beard and his pipe wagged so fiercely while he stood with his hands in his pockets in front of them. But when I came home from the office next day, lo! my room had undergone a rare change! The oleographs and the prints had vanished, and the walls were bright with a nice little collection of water-colour drawings, etchings, and pencil sketches, all arranged in a fashion which denoted the master hand.

"That gentleman wot was here yesterday—him with the long hair and the greeny-blue necktie—he done it all," said our maid-of-all-work, catching me in the midst of my astonishment. "He come soon after you was gone, he did, with all these pictures in a cab, and he was here all the mornin' a-puttin' of 'em up, and a-sendin' me for nails and bottled porter—made hisself at 'ome, he did. An' give me 'arf-a-crown when he went away in a 'ansom. Ain't many of 'is sort, if he do dress hisself a bit fancy-like, is there?"

I quite agreed with her in that, and I felt very much obliged to Uncle Richard for his kindly thoughtfulness, and at once let him know that I was. His pictures kept me company while I worked at night. It was seldom that I had visitors. I should have liked MacTavish to visit me often, but when I first mentioned the matter to him he answered rather brusquely that he never went anywhere except for a walk with me, and I knew that what he really meant was that I was not to ask him to accept hos-

pitality which he could not return. For I was then, as indeed I was always, in utter ignorance of his whereabouts when he was at home, and I used to picture him living in a garret on oatmeal and herrings —two articles of food which he frequently recommended to me as particularly good for all brain-workers.

Truth to tell, I did not want any visitors at that time. I had not yet given up my work at Drake's, though I now only went there at ten o'clock and left promptly at five; I was writing two articles a week for the *Lantern*; and I was at work on my historical romance. I never felt tired in those days, and the greatest happiness I dreamt of (my memories of Andalusia having grown somewhat pale) was to get into my own room, with my books, my pictures, and my papers, and be able to work uninterruptedly until I became sleepy, when I always went off to bed. It was much more to my taste to spend my time in this fashion than in receiving or visiting friends, though I never let a week go by without at least one visit to Keppel Street. The atmosphere of Uncle Richard's house was at that time full of cheerfulness and sunlight; Sylvia said she had not seen him as bright for years, and she believed that his foreign correspondent, whoever he was, now sent him good news—at any rate, he had not had any fits of depression or gloominess for some time. Then he was vastly pleased that Sylvia had made a success, and that I had justified my action in coming to London; indeed, any success of ours made him a great deal happier than a triumph of his own, and it was at that very period that his best work was being done.

However, I was not to be without visitors—or, upon one occasion, without one, whom, after he had remained in my room a few minutes, I wished to kick downstairs and into the street. I was hard at work one evening when Arabella—who, the newsagent's shop and lending library being closed at eight, assumed after that hour the duties relinquished at seven fifty-nine by the maid-of-all-work, who, having a sweetheart, steadily refused to live in—knocked at my door somewhat unceremoniously, and merely stating that here was a gentleman to see me, ushered in my Cousin Thomas. As he was about the last person in the world whom I had any expectation of seeing, I was considerably taken aback, and no doubt greeted him with some confusion and surprise, and perhaps with a certain amount of shyness. It seemed strange to see one of the Benjamin Harrington family there.

Mr. Thomas Harrington, however, was neither confused nor shy. I looked him over carefully and a little wonderingly as he made himself at home in my easiest chair, and was astonished to remember, after reckoning things up, that he was now eighteen years of age. But I was more amused than astonished to see that Mr. Thomas, whatever he might be doing in London, was not minded to be behindhand as regards the fashions, though I quickly perceived that his tastes in the way of fine raiment were those of a certain section of young City men, rather than of the loungers of Piccadilly and Bond Street. His glossy silk hat had a very curly brim, and as he did not remove it for a full minute after entering my room, I was made aware that he liked to wear it at a jaunty angle over his right ear and eyebrow. His pearl-grey suit was very long as regards the coat-tails, and very

tight in the trousers legs ; his collar was so high and his cuffs so deep that he gave one the appearance of having been immured by some means in a linen casing from which only bits of him escaped. Such engaging aids to grandeur as patent leather boots, very much pointed at the toe, white box-cloth gaiters, a voluminous neckcloth and a large horse-shoe pin completed Mr. Thomas's toilet, and I saw that he had already taken to an eye-glass, a tooth-pick, and a large cane with a silver knob. As for the rest of him, he had grown into a tall, rather fat—and flabby—youth, with a big, vacuous face, redeemed from sheer nothingness by a sly expression, but not improved by it, a damp, perpetually-gaping mouth, which the knob of his cane seemed to have been specially designed to serve as stop-gap to, and mild blue eyes which stood well out of their sockets. I compared Mr. Thomas as he then was with the Master Thomas I had left at Sicaster, and preferred the small boy to the would-be masher.

"And what are you doing in London, Tom?" I inquired after I had made all the proper inquiries concerning the people at home. "I'd no idea that you were here."

"Been here three or four months," he answered. "I'm learning the brewing with Booker and Hoppers in Walworth. Don't live down that way, you know—no fear. When I came here I said to the mater that it didn't matter what the guv'nor said, I was going to be well put up. Dick Letherby—you remember Dick?—he's finishing his articles with some lawyer chaps in the City; him and me have rooms together in Bloomsbury Square—they do us jolly well there, too."

He looked round my sitting-room, noting the pictures, the books, the general appearance.

"You ain't badly lodged here," he said, nodding his head condescendingly. "Of course, the furniture isn't anything like ours, but it isn't bad. Still dotty on the writing game, I see."

"Yes, Tom," I answered. "I am, as you say, still dotty on the writing game."

"I read one of those pieces of yours in the *Lantern*," he said. "Why, it's all about the sort of stuff that the men talk at Highcroft—and in broad Yorkshire, too. Seemed queer to read that sort of talk again, after getting used to proper talk, like this London talk."

I had observed that Cousin Thomas had already cultivated the London accent—but he appeared to have done his cultivation in a bad school.

"Yes, I should think it would seem—queer," I said.

"Shouldn't have thought they'd have wanted to print that sort of stuff in a London newspaper," he observed, quite thoughtfully. "Lord! I could write out miles of that sort of thing—only I can't recollect it."

"Ah, exactly!" said I. "It isn't quite easy to—recollect it, is it? And you like living in London, Tom?"

He slapped his leg with his cane and grinned fatuously. And having grinned, he favoured me with a wink—as crafty a wink as a twelvemonth infant might have indulged in.

"We know the ropes pretty well, me and Letherby," he answered. "We generally go somewhere and do something most nights. The Gaiety's our spot, as a rule. There is something to see there,

anyway. We went to see that thing they're all raving about the other night—what do they call it—*Patience*? Yes—*Patience*. Didn't care for it—they talked such a lot of stuff that I couldn't understand. I like the ballet—the Alhambra isn't half bad."

"The ballet is fascinating," I remarked. "I am sure it will please you, Tom."

"Yes," he said reflectively. "I'm a fair judge of that sort of thing. I say, that little girl of Uncle Dick's ain't half bad, in her way, of course. Of course, it isn't much of a part—slow piece, I call it—and they've no chance in those old-fashioned dresses; but I've heard two or three say she'll make an actress, though, of course, she'd never be up to Gaiety form—hasn't either the face or the figure, eh?"

"Are you talking of Miss Leighton?" I asked.

He nodded, grinned, and favoured me with another wink. I never saw any wink so childishly, lumpishly innocent as Cousin Thomas's. It represented his fat soul.

"I suppose they all call themselves by some name or other," he said. "Anything that takes their fancy, eh? Of course, we know all about it, eh? I've heard my mater and the guv'nor talk of it. Oh, I know a good deal more than some folks would think—no error! The other night Letherby and me, we went with a friend of his to a club where there were some writing fellows, like yourself—chaps that write about the theatres, you know. They were talking about her—Sylvia. Said she'd do well in those sort of parts—ingeniuses or something—and one chap wanted to know who she was. Some said one thing and some another. I said nothing—not me! I played parrot—said nothing and thought a lot."

"That was right, Tom," I said, very much relieved. "They're a talkative lot, you know, those-writing fellows."

"Ah!" he said with a knowing shake of his head, "I know how to hold my tongue—no blooming fear. I wasn't going to talk there. Me and Letherby and his friend—Sanderson, they called him—we went to have a b.-and-s. on the quiet afterwards, and a cigar. 'It's all very well,' I says, confidentially, 'for chaps like those to talk as if they knew everything. Those that do know say nothing,' I says. 'They'd have been a bit on the surprised side,' I says, 'if I'd let out that the little girl was my cousin—on the wrong side of the blanket.' That fetched Letherby and the other chap, I can tell you. Oh, I don't blab everything in bar-parlours—no fear! But I can give chapter and verse if I like. I say, have you got anything to drink?"

I possessed a small stock of drinkables, laid in in case Uncle Richard should ever descend upon me unexpectedly, and I hastened to supply Mr. Thomas's demands. It was well that I had some diversion at that moment, for my first instinct was to seize my imbecile cousin by his fool's head and throw him neck and crop through the open window. But while I was busy with bottles and glasses I had time to reflect and to see that it really is wise to answer a fool according to his folly.

"Ah!" I said, when Mr. Thomas had mixed himself a drink, and had lighted a very strong-smelling cigar. "It's only wise men who know how to hold their tongues, isn't it, Tom? You did well not to talk in public. Uncle Richard, you know, has a very fiery temper. He'd have killed those writing fellows you

were talking about if they'd heard anything from you and had repeated it. Of course, Letherby or Sanderson wouldn't say a word?"

"Confidence is confidence—between gentlemen," said Cousin Thomas, very grandly. "Mum's the word eh?"

"Have you called at Keppel Street?" I asked.

"Once," he answered. "Dropped in one night The girl was at the theatre, and Dick had a lot o' fellows there with hair as long as his own. Queer lot, I call them—half mad, and he's madder than any of them. Lord! the way he dresses himself! Keeps jolly good liquor, though, and isn't so stingy with it as some people I could lay a name to."

"Ah! who are they, Tom?" I inquired pleasantly, though I felt more like smacking his bovine countenance. "Somebody been treating you badly?"

He uttered an animal sort of grunt, and sucked the knob of his walking cane.

"The guv'nor's always a bit on the near side in that way," he said. "He likes his whack himself, but he doesn't see that another man's a right to his—at least—"

"Unless he's old enough to be a grandfather, eh, Tom?" I said, laughing. "Well, help yourself while you've the chance."

Cousin Thomas helped himself, and appeared to be very comfortable. Liquor, however, did not make him brilliant—he sat sucking at his big cigar and staring at me in silence, and reminded me more than ever of some large calf which has fed to repletion and stands staring at nothing out of sheer inanition. I was glad when he said that he must really go, and sorry that I did not dare to tell him that if he talked

about Sylvia again to any Letherbys or Sandersons I would break his fat head. But I knew very well that any threat of mine arising out of these circumstances would certainly have led to a publicity which seeming indifference might avert.

I had had no desire to renew acquaintance with Cousin Thomas—poor oaf and dullard that he was! —and it made me reflect upon the smallness of the world to think that he should turn up in London. But soon after that I was again reminded that London is everybody's trysting-place, for, just as unexpectedly as Cousin Thomas had descended upon me, I myself descended upon—Lady Andalusia Trewithen.

This, however, was an unexpected meeting. Sometimes, when my work at Drake's was not of a particularly pressing nature—and I had a considerable amount of liberty there now that Drake himself knew that I was independent of him—I used to take an afternoon off and go with Sylvia into the Park, or to a morning performance at one of the theatres, or to some show of pictures. On one of these occasions we found ourselves in a Bond Street gallery inspecting a collection of works by a foreign artist whose name I have forgotten. There were few people there—I wondered why, for the pictures, if strange in conception and eccentric in method, were notable and impressive. One of them—a bizarre treatment of the story of Salome—so fascinated me that I sat down before it and stared at it so long that Sylvia grew weary, and strolled away to another part of the gallery. It was some time before she came back—she was smiling a little.

"Jerry," she whispered, bending down to me—for there were other fascinated beholders of the Salome

picture—"you're a deep admirer of female beauty, aren't you? Come away from that thing—it reminds me of a butcher's shop!—and I'll show you one of the most beautiful women you've ever seen. Come!"

"A real woman—or a picture?" I asked. "Otherwise, here I stay until I have quite worked out my ideas about the way in which this man got—"

"Never mind how he got his effects!" she said. "Come and look at my beauty. Like you, she is fascinated by one of these raw meat things, and is regarding it with rapt eyes—'In stony fetters fixt, and motionless,' like the *Comus* lady, only she's very much warm flesh and blood—a Carmen, with a red rose in blue-black hair."

Sylvia had led me away to another part of the gallery as she talked, and suddenly turning a corner she indicated with a slight turn of her head a lady who sat, elbow on knee and chin in hand, leaning forward in absorbed contemplation of a picture which represented a very unconventional Andromeda chained to the rock and watching the approach of an equally unconventional Perseus. She turned a little in our direction. I felt the hot blood leap to my face.

"Sylvia!" I whispered, "it's—it's Andalusia!"

After that wild flash and leap of recognition I wanted to run away. But Andalusia's great dark eyes had fallen upon me. She rose slowly; a slight deepening of colour showed itself in her own cheeks; she came forward, looking at me very searchingly. And she suddenly smiled, and held out her hand. "It is Little Doctor Bookworm!" she said.

I was seized with a painful fit of shyness—the Andalusia of the old days would have teased me.

But this Andalusia had become a woman—not merely of the world, but of tact and sense, and within a moment she had put me at my ease. I introduced Sylvia to her; she said instantly that she had seen Sylvia at the Athenæum quite recently, and congratulated her on her success.

“And I have read your sketches and stories in the *Lantern*,” she continued, turning to me. “I recognised some of them as countryside stories that you told me in the library at Wintersleave Manor. What a long time ago that is!”

I had been looking at her carefully as she spoke. It was the same and yet not the same Andalusia. The handsome girl had grown into a very beautiful woman, and there was something gentle and soft about her that had not shown itself in her when I knew her at Wintersleave.

“It is really not so very long,” I said. “A little more than four years.”

She sighed—and as she sighed she smiled.

“You speak of four years as of four days,” she said; “but there have been so many changes during the last year or two that it seems more like forty years since I saw Wintersleave. Do you know that both Mr. and Mrs. Wickham are dead, Mr. Emery?”

It seemed strange to hear her address me so formally—at Wintersleave she had called me by all sorts of nicknames. But upon reflecting that we were now grown up and that she was the daughter of a belted Earl, I too became very formal, and answered politely that I knew of the death of my old friends, and that it had been a great grief to me, and that now I should scarcely care to enter the Manor House again, for it would never seem the same.

"Ah, but you have not recognised the possibilities that lie in a new tenancy," she said, smiling, "and I see now that your friends at Wintersleave do not give you all the news. You have not heard, for instance, that my father has taken over the house and shooting for the three years of Mr. Wickham's lease which were yet to run at the time of his death?"

"No," I replied; "I have not heard that."

She laughed gently.

"Wintersleave Manor House is a very cheap place to keep up," she said. "You agree to spend so much a year on the gardens, and that's all—at least, that's nominally all. We are going there soon—to rusticate. To tell you the truth, it's not going to cost us anything—Mr. Wickham had paid up his lease before he died. I must renew my acquaintance with the people. But they will have forgotten me long since."

I might have told her that the Wintersleave people never forgot anything or anybody that had ever afforded them one-tenth the opportunity for gossip and laughter that she had, but I refrained, and said politely that I was sure everybody in the place would be glad to see her.

"I'm afraid we shan't be able to keep up the reputation which Mr. and Mrs. Wickham left behind them," she said, laughing. "My father is not exactly the sort of man to spend his afternoons with the old men and women, and we are very poor. But we will do our best to behave ourselves. I, at any rate, can promise not to go hunting for highwaymen's ghosts at midnight—do you remember?"

"I thought you had forgotten," I replied.

"I never forget anything—unless I particularly wish to. No—I remember all of it," she said. "It

was the only escapade I had during my visit—which was good, for me. Oh, yes, I remember it very well indeed. I did not say so at the time, but I was dreadfully afraid of the cows—they looked so huge in that uncertain light—and the rattling of the cage made me inclined to scream. And—here is another secret for you—the revolver in my pocket was not loaded."

"I confess that I was afraid of the revolver," I said.

Then we laughed—laughed as we used to laugh in the old careless days—and for a moment Lady Andalusia Trewithen was her old gay self. Two or three people standing near heard the merry note in her voice, and turned to regard her with open admiration. But in a moment she sighed again. And then, her mood changing as quickly as in the time of which we had just been speaking, she suddenly bent her eyes upon Sylvia and myself in a keen scrutinising gaze which had something of wistfulness in it.

"I envy you—both of you," she said. "You have objects and ambitions. When you came in just now I was wishing I could paint, or write, or act—do anything. I would rather write a book, play Desdemona, even compose a popular song, than—do nothing."

"But every one of us can do something," said Sylvia, with ready perception. "And whatever anyone does is—ah, I can't put it into words."

"I think I know," said Lady Andalusia. "'Small service is true service while it lasts,' and 'They also serve who only stand and wait,' and that sort of thing, eh? Yes; but I wish I was clever, like you, because—— Tell me," she went on, suddenly interrupting herself, "do you ever think of anything but

your work—does it, I mean, occupy your mind entirely?"

She seemed quite eager for a reply to this question. I began to consider what my answer should be. But Sylvia answered readily.

"I have never thought of anything but my work," she said. "I have lived with it day and night ever since I can remember anything. It—fills me."

Lady Andalusia looked at her—and sighed. Then she looked at me.

"I—I—yes, I think I do nothing but think about my novel just now," I answered. "At least, I think I think so—it's very engrossing, anyway."

Lady Andalusia laughed. She looked quizzically at me—then earnestly at Sylvia. Then she held out her hand.

"I think I can see who is most engrossed," she said. "Mr. Gerard Emery, man-like, loves his work well, but is not averse to—flirtation with pleasure."

"You would not have me a dull boy, Lady Andalusia?" I said, as she shook hands with me.

"No," she answered. "I—to tell the truth, I was thinking how good it must be for—anyone, to be so engrossed in his or her work that it—it became an obsession. You're obsessed by yours," she said, turning to Sylvia, with sudden emphasis. "Anyone could see that."

Then she asked, with great kindness of manner, and as if we should be putting her under some obligation by acceding to her request, if we would come to see her some day when our work could spare us; and when we had promised that we would and she had given us her address, she went away, moving down the gallery with the grace I remembered so well. I

watched her out of sight. But Sylvia was watching me.

I turned and found her eyes fixed upon me. She had a rare gift of sympathy, Sylvia.

"There, Jerry!" she said. "Once more!"

Then she waited, still watching me, for my next words.

"Sylvia," I said at last, "Andalusia has—changed."

She put her arm in mine, and we, too, walked towards the door.

"Sylvia," I said again, "Andalusia has had, and still has, some trouble on her mind."

She pressed my arm.

"Yes," she said.

We went out into the rush and whirl of the crowded streets, and made our way homewards. We had walked quite a long way in silence before either of us spoke again. It was I who spoke.

"I do not like to think that Andalusia is troubled," I said. "It—it doesn't seem exactly—fitting."

Sylvia gave my arm a little squeeze.

"Jerry," she said, in a peculiarly coaxing tone, "have you fallen in love again?"

"I wonder what good that would be?" I answered, laughing a little bitterly. "You forget, besides, that I'm not a boy now, Sylvia."

Sylvia laughed.

"Hear him!" she said. "Talking as if he were a man——"

"I am a man," I retorted. "I was twenty-one in March—as you know."

"Dick is forty-three, and the most absolute child in the world," she said. "As for you, Jerry, you are

a mere infant. I was wondering if it would be good for you to fall in love with Lady Andalusia for the second time. Perhaps it would. It might keep you out of worse mischief. But I'm afraid nothing would ever come of it, my poor Jerry. Earls' daughters, however poverty-stricken their fathers may be, don't marry poor authors, do they?—except in penny novels."

"I shall not always be poor," I retorted. "Why shouldn't I make money as well as anybody else?"

"No reason whatever, my dear," answered Sylvia, laughing. Then, her mood suddenly changing, she pressed my arm again, and said earnestly, "I shouldn't like to see you unhappy about anything, Jerry dear, and I believe that Lady Andalusia is in love already with someone who is—not you."

I dropped Sylvia's arm in sheer astonishment, and stared incredulously at her.

"How did you come to think of that?" I exclaimed. "I—I didn't see anything that made me think so."

"No; but I am a woman, you see, Jerry," she answered. "That makes all the difference."

We walked on in silence, both thinking.

"I'm not going to think about Andalusia," I said at last. "At least—not more than I can help. But—what would you do, Sylvia, if you had once been in love with a man, and you hadn't quite forgotten him, and you met him again, and——"

"I'm afraid I shouldn't be quite able not to think of him," she answered, laughing. "But if—if there wasn't much chance, Jerry, I should try to think as little as I could. If I were you I should fix all my thoughts on the novel just now."

"Ye-es," I answered. "Of course. But, Sylvia—suppose you were a bit in love?"

Sylvia laughed again.

"I am, Jerry—madly in love," she said. "I'm in love with—my Art."

CHAPTER XIII.

THE HARRINGTON RESERVE.

ALTHOUGH Sylvia laughed as she made this confession of absolute devotion to her first love, I knew what entire sincerity lay behind it. From her childhood she had cherished great ideas and fond hopes of becoming an actress—a great actress—and had always kept her purpose in view. She possessed certain natural qualities which, as Uncle Richard had more than once observed in my presence, when discussing her chances with some of his friends, went far in providing her with a proper equipment. She was of a quick intelligence, a fine imagination, and a cool judgment; she thought no pains too great to take in mastering the technicalities of her art; finally, she was gifted with an independence of conception which made even a small part notable in her hands, and was sure, in the end, to elevate a great one to the highest planes of excellence. But Sylvia's powers might be summed up in a hackneyed phrase—she was a born actress. Yet no one would have known her for an actress—off the stage. There was no professional stamp upon her; she might have passed, as she herself once said, for a better sort of nursery governess who knew how to dress well in a quiet fashion. On the stage she became transformed. No one knew the value of technique and of effect better than she, but she got her effect with singular ease and with what seemed a perfect disregard of stage

conventions. It was the best tribute to her genius that when she was acting most she conveyed the impression that she was not acting at all. She had neither a stage voice nor a stage presence, and she was not a beauty ; but she got hold of an audience at once, and held it to the end, and even when she was playing small parts better known people with bigger ones suffered by comparison with her. Uncle Richard always claimed that from the beginning she created an atmosphere of her own, and he used to predict a great ultimate success for her in two characters—Juliet and Lady Macbeth ; Juliet, in his opinion, being a slip of a girl who was plunged into womanhood ere she had realised her childhood, and Lady Macbeth a little, red-headed, red-nosed Scotswoman, with a sharp tongue and a decided faculty of making people do things. These conceptions, perhaps, scarcely agreed with Sylvia's ideas on the same subjects, but her reading of anything was invariably distinguished by freshness and originality.

None of us, I think, had foreseen that Sylvia's rise to fame would be of speedy accomplishment. Uncle Richard had always said that she would do something Big, and I had believed in her star from the first ; but we anticipated the usual ladder-climbing for her, and she herself used always to speak of her prospects as involving much hard work and perseverance. We were not allowing for the effect that her peculiar powers and gifts might produce upon some mighty person who would have the sense, penetration, and business acumen to see in her exactly what he wanted—in short, we had all forgotten that there is money in something fresh, and that theatrical speculators have keen eyes for new talent.

Sylvia made her *début* in the spring of her nineteenth year—during the remainder of the season she played various parts in Mr. Courtney's series of revivals. They were not great parts, in the usual acceptation of the phrase, but she gave a new meaning and distinction to them, and continued to increase in favour with the critics and the public. MacTavish and I used to secure front seats in the pit whenever she had a new part, and the people round about us must have wondered at our great enthusiasm. I took Mr. Winterbee to see her on one of his periodical visits to town; he expressed himself as being quite satisfied with her performance, and said she was a clever young woman, but reverted to his rooted conviction that there had been no great acting since Macready. Having expounded his views on that point, he reminded me that my Aunt Sophia was not aware of his extensive knowledge of things theatrical, and that it did not do to talk to her about matters on which she was prejudiced.

"Greatly against the theatre, is your Aunt Sophia, you know, Gerard," said Mr. Winterbee. "Gr-eat-ly against the the-a-tre. Some people are, you know—no accounting for taste. Taste, sir, is a queer thing—a very queer thing is taste. If some of the people who go to our chapel, Gerard, saw me coming out of this theatre, they would say I was going to the Devil! They would, sir, they would indeed. To—the—Devil! Fact, I assure you. And say I was taking you with me. But I'll tell you what, sir, they wouldn't object to receiving some of the profits that are made out of theatres! Not they, sir; money, sir, is every man's master, Master of everything, is money, Gerard—and mistress too."

Mr. Winterbee then inquired with great solicitude if Sylvia was earning money, and if I was, and if Uncle Richard was doing well, and expressed a fervent hope that we should all save every penny we could, for nobody ever knew when a rainy day might come.

"Painting pictures, and writing books, and play-acting are all very well, you know, Gerard," he said; "all very well, sir, are those things—but poor matters to depend upon. Your painter loses a finger or two—done for, sir. Your writer's health breaks down—done for, sir, quite done for. Same thing with actors and all such folk. Nothing like a good, sound business. Once built up, others can work it for you. People who live by their wits, sir, should take care to save all the money they can while they're earning it. Only one string to their bow, sir—dependent upon their brains; and brains, sir, brains are unreliable things. Should make hay while the sun shines, all such people—not throw their money away. If you've got a shilling, spend elevenpence of it—less if you can. Hope this young woman doesn't spend her money on finery?"

I assured him that the young woman did no such thing, and was very careful of her money.

"Doesn't follow Dick, then," he said, with a chuckle. "Mad fellow, your Uncle Dick—str-a-ange fellow, sir. Makes a good deal of money, too, I hear. Wonder what he does with it?—used to spend it freely enough years ago."

I knew that Uncle Richard made a great deal of money, but I knew nothing whatever about his spending it in any extravagant way. He used to entertain small parties of his friends pretty regularly, but as

these festivities meant nothing more than the moderate consumption of whisky, cigars, and tobacco, there was no great outlay upon them, and of personal extravagance I never knew Uncle Richard guilty. Yet, although I knew he received good prices for his pictures, and was always hard at work, he never gave me the impression of being what Mr. Winterbee called a warm man. The majority of men who have comfortable balances at their banks and are secure in the knowledge of good investments, communicate an impression of their solidity to you; of this order Uncle Richard was not. His free-and-easy manner and unconventional attire did not suggest stocks and shares and gilt-edged securities any more than Mr. Winterbee's severely correct black coat and square-toed boots suggested the artistic temperament.

Uncle Richard and Sylvia spent the August and September of that year in Devonshire, he painting, and she studying a new part in which she was to appear at the Athenæum in October. During their absence I was somewhat lonely. MacTavish, having been ill, had gone to Scotland for a long rest, and there were few other people in London that I cared for. Remembering her invitation, I called once or twice about that time on Lady Andalusia, who was living with her father in a suite of rooms in one of the small streets in Mayfair. She seemed as lonely as I was, and there was a certain wistfulness about her which I did not understand. I gathered that her father spent the greater part of his time at his clubs and that she had not many friends; I also inferred from what I saw that the St. Vithiens *ménage* was a very modest one, and that funds were not plentiful. Once I saw the Earl himself—an old gentleman with

very fierce whiskers, who evidently took great care of his personal appearance, and walked with a swagger. Andalusia was looking forward to their departure for Wintersleave, she said, and she spoke of the country with a certain amount of longing—it was obvious that she had some trouble on her mind, and there were moments when I wished that I dare ask her what that trouble was. But I kept a stern hold upon myself at these interviews—we talked of my novel, which was drawing to an end, and of Sylvia, and of Uncle Richard's pictures, and avoided other matters. And yet—I thought a great deal about Andalusia—a great deal. And in spite of Sylvia's rather confident remark I could not bring myself to believe that Andalusia was in love with somebody who was not me.

A great longing to see Highcroft Farm again seized upon me about that time, and grew so irresistible that I made up my mind to go down there for a few days. I knew that I should find some changes—Aunt Caroline was married, and had gone to live in another part of the county, and my grandmother was now bedridden, and Uncle Benjamin, judging by the accounts I received from various quarters, was lord and master of everything. I am not sure that I wanted to see any people at Wintersleave—always excepting Aunt Frances and Mr. Langton—but I had a great desire for the fields and woods, and for the scent of the barley. And the desire increasing as days went on, I set off one Friday afternoon to spend a week-end in the old village. The heat of the day was over when I got to Sicaster; the August evening was sweet with the scent of barley as I walked across the fields to Wintersleave.

One never notices how very little the material things of life change in the country until one has been away from some well-known spot for some time. In and about the old farmhouse everything seemed to look as it had looked in many a bygone harvest. There was the usual sense of extra labour, the usual litter in the stackyards, the usual group of Irish harvesters gathered about the pump, resting after their long day's work. Nothing was changed in the house, except that my Aunt Frances looked older and somewhat careworn. The parlour, wherein a traveller's meal was awaiting me, looked just as it had looked for as many years as I could remember; every familiar object in it was in the appointed place. I had no doubt that the tides of life had ebbed and flowed with perfect rhythm at Highcroft ever since I had left it. And yet there were changes there.

Aunt Frances had many questions to ask me about myself and about our relations in London. She sighed a little when I told her that Sylvia had begun her theatrical career, but said with genuine pleasure that she was glad to hear of her success. I was sorry to have to tell her—I knew she would question me on the matter without loss of time—that Uncle Richard was still eccentric in his religious opinions, and did not attend public worship, save at very irregular intervals, and then perhaps not from motives of which she would approve. As for Cousin Thomas, I dismissed him with the remark that I saw little of him, and believed that he was well able to take care of himself.

I went round the village next morning, visiting favourite haunts and renewing old acquaintances. The general opinion, expressed with rustic frankness,

was that I had grown, and looked very smart. There was a good deal of reverence shown me—to live in London town in those days, near as they are to our own, conferred much glory upon anyone in the eyes of country people, to whom the metropolis then seemed half the world away.

Aunt Frances had asked me to make a special call upon old Wraby—he had had some sort of a stroke, and was confined to his cottage. I found him in his elbow-chair, by a wood fire, grumbling because he could not get out into the harvest fields. When he became convinced—after many explanations and asseverations—that I was the old mistress's grandson, and that I was really Miss Mary's orphan lad whom he had ridden on his knee and told country tales to a thousand times, the old man became garrulous.

"I didn't reckon to be laid up just when harvest time was a-coming on," he said. "I've harvested six-and-fifty year for th' Harringtons, and I wor harvestin' here and theer about t' village as a youngster afore I went to Highcroft, but fifty-six year it is for th' Harringtons, I do know. 'Cause I notched every year off as it went on the backside o' th' owd cupboard door there. Look inside, bairn, and count the notches."

I was obliged to consult the cupboard door and to confirm old Wraby's statement.

"And this here would ha' been the fifty-seventh," he complained. "I'd aimed at making sixty on it—I'm ower young to be laid aside."

"Ye're ower owd to be working," said Wraby's shrill-tongued daughter, who had the reputation of being a bit of a shrew. "Ye owt to hev a pension

and be a gentleman. T' Harringtons has had all t' flesh and blood out on yer by this time."

"Ho'd thi tongue!" commanded old Wraby. "I weern't hev owt said agen th' Harringtons. Th' owd missus an' me's allus been good friends, if we did use to fall out about th' gardening. She niver wo'd hev them berry bushes rived up; if she'd hev them berry bushes rived up and t' ground trenched I could ha' made two grand sparrer-grass beds theer. But she niver would."

"You can remember all about things for a long time, can't you, Wraby?" I shouted into his ear.

"I can remember all about t' family iver sin' I remember owt," he answered, nodding his head with great emphasis. "A fine, respectable family it allus were—a better sort, as you might say. Allus varry proud folk, were th' Harringtons. Th' owd maister, he wor proud; an' th' owd missis she's proud—they're all proud."

"Theer's nowt to be proud on i' pride," said the shrill-voiced daughter.

"Ho'd thi tongue!" commanded old Wraby. "Thou's nowt to be proud on—eyther i' good looks or owt else. Th' Harringtons were allus a fine-looking lot—all t' sons and t' dowters an' all, 'ceptin' Maister Richard, him 'at went to paint picters i' London—he wor a bit on t' smallish sidé. T' other brothers, Benjamin and John, they wor big, fine-built men. Of course, Maister Benjamin, he's i' t' brewin' business, and looks efter t' farm for t' owd missis."

These last remarks of old Wraby's occasioned some surprise in me. Benjamin I knew, and Richard, but who was John Harrington? Of him I had never heard. I knew that my grandfather and grandmother

had had a large family, and that two daughters, Jane and Ellen, had died in infancy, but I knew nothing of any sons but my two uncles. What did old Wraby mean?

The shrill-tongued daughter had gone out into the little garden in front of the cottage; her voice, lifted up in altercation with a neighbour, proclaimed her indifference to her father's reminiscent vein. I placed my lips to old Wraby's ear.

"Where is John, Wraby?" I shouted.

Old Wraby shook his head.

"Dead, is Maister John Harrington," he answered. "Dead a mort o' years. He went to learn thi lawyerin' trade i' York, he did, and then he wor ordered to London town to mak' hisself better acquainted, like, wi' t' lawyerin', and 'at efter that no news cam' about him until it wor reported that he'd died i' foreign parts. He wor a fine-looking young man—cam' between Miss Frances and Miss Caroline, he did. But he died when he wor nowt no more than a lad. Theer wor niver much mention on him after his death—dead and gone, he wor, and done wi'. Theer wor two lasses an' all, 'at died when they wor nowt but bairns. Three lads and six lasses theer wor, altogether."

Over our mid-day dinner I told Aunt Frances of my peregrinations during the morning. And being somewhat curious about the information which I had unexpectedly derived from old Wraby, I suddenly asked her how it was that I had never heard of my Uncle John. I knew as soon as the words had left my lips that I had asked a disconcerting question.

Aunt Frances was carving a sirloin of beef; she let the knife drop into the gravy with a crash and a

splash. She made some exclamation about her clumsiness, but I knew that she had been startled. Her face was vaguely troubled as she lifted it.

"Who has told you anything of your Uncle John, Gerard?" she asked sharply.

"Old Wraby was full of reminiscences of the family," I replied. "You know how he talks. He mentioned every member, from my grandfather downwards."

Aunt Frances looked vexed. She helped me to the beef.

"Your Uncle John is dead—he died when he was quite a young man," she replied. "It is a long time ago—that, perhaps, is why you never heard him mentioned. You know, Gerard, that none of us are given to talking of our own affairs."

I understood from that that this was a subject upon which she was not anxious to hold much conversation; indeed, she turned away from it at once and began to talk of something else. And when any of the Harringtons indicated that they desired to hold their peace and expected others to hold theirs—well, there was no more to be said.

I saw my grandmother that afternoon—she now looked like a piece of creamy-white marble, and I wondered to find that she was still in possession of her senses so far that she could remember names, and seemed to be aware of what went on about her. She smiled when Aunt Frances mentioned my name, and by a movement of her hand indicated that I should sit down at her bedside. She murmured a few words, but I could make little sense of them, and I soon found that she had lost all notion of time, for in a few minutes she called me Richard.

I sat with my grandmother for a little time while Aunt Frances went to give some necessary instructions in the kitchen, and I soon found that her mind had gone back to other days, and that she was under the impression that I really was Richard, come from London to see her. And presently, plucking at my hand, she asked me if I was taking great care of John, as I had promised, and added that John must come to see her when he could find time to spare. I said "Yes" to all this, but it seemed immaterial to her whether she was answered or not, and she presently began to murmur something about the marriage of her daughter Sophia to William Winterbee. I argued from this that my grandmother was re-living much of the past before she crossed the line between present and future.

During this visit I, of course, came across Uncle Benjamin. He was surlily polite, having become convinced that I was really earning my own living, and had not come at that time to borrow anything, and he went so far as to offer me a seat in his dog-cart while he drove round the farm. Naturally, he wanted to hear what news I had of London, for he was as fond of small gossip as anybody. Like Mr. Winterbee, he wanted to know if Uncle Richard was doing well, and it gave me great pleasure to inform him of some of the prices which I knew Uncle Richard to have received of late, and of Sylvia's success and her good prospects for the future. Uncle Benjamin grunted—it was a sort of indulgent grunt which might have come from a pig who, rejecting one potato as not being suited to his taste, grudgingly indicates that it has no objection to a fellow porker having it.

"Well, this picture-painting and play-acting and book-writing isn't in my line," he said, in a tone of fine superiority. "Of course, we all know that there are folks who have tastes of that sort, but this is the first time we've had them in our family, that's all. If you and your Uncle Richard can make a living out of it, I've nothing to say against it. As for the young woman—why, it would be a good thing if Richard found her a home elsewhere, or else let people know who she is."

"Uncle Richard is perhaps the best judge of that," I remarked.

"I'm only stating my opinion," said Uncle Benjamin righteously. "I know what folks think. If she isn't his daughter, why does he treat her as if she was? He's doing the girl harm, too, as he'll find out."

"He would be furious if anybody hinted at such a thing," I said. "And he can be terribly angry if he likes. I've seen him."

"He can be as angry and as furious as he likes," retorted Uncle Benjamin. "That'll not alter what I'm saying. He should take his relations into his confidence. He's no business to have that young woman in his house unless folk know how she stands to him."

"But," said I, "Uncle Richard has always said that Sylvia Leighton is the daughter of dead friends of his—always."

"Humph!" said Uncle Benjamin. Then he changed the subject, and said he supposed that I occasionally saw his son Thomas in London. I answered that I had seen him and that he looked very well.

"I hope that Thomas will stick to his trade," said

Uncle Benjamin. "I don't want him to get any high-flown notions or to have silly, nonsensical ideas put into his head. And I hope he'll not get amongst a theatre-going lot. There isn't a worse place in the world for a young man than London is."

"Doesn't that depend upon the young man?" I asked. "And upon his tastes?"

Uncle Benjamin answered that young folk had no right to any tastes at all—their duty was to work and to keep their places. He said that in his opinion Uncle Richard would not have been the eccentric person he was if it hadn't been for London.

"Did London do Uncle John any harm?" I inquired.

I asked this question with feigned innocence; in reality I had an intention in asking it. I wanted to see what effect the mention of his dead brother's name would have on Uncle Benjamin.

The effect was curious enough, and came with startling quickness. Uncle Benjamin's face grew almost black from some sort of emotion, and his brows contracted in an angry frown. He snapped at me as if I had bitten him and he wanted to bite me back.

"Your Uncle John!" he exclaimed. "And who's been fool enough to tell you aught about your Uncle John? Some of your aunts, I suppose?"

"No," I replied; "I never heard of him until this morning, and then old Wraby mentioned him. I spoke to Aunt Frances about him, but she wouldn't tell me anything."

"No," said Uncle Benjamin, with one of his best sneers; "I daresay not—I daresay not. But I can tell you who your Uncle John was, and then you'll

know and be satisfied and say no more about it, for we're none so fond of his name in our family. Your Uncle John was a silly young fool that must go the pace in London, and got himself into trouble, and cost his relatives a lot of money to put him right. That was your Uncle John."

"And went abroad and died, didn't he?" I inquired.

"Died at Quebec, in Canada," answered Uncle Benjamin. "And considering the trouble he'd caused and the expense he'd put his friends to, it was the best thing that could happen to him. It's a sore subject is that of your Uncle John—we've never been used to wasters in our family."

Uncle Benjamin spoke with such honest indignation on this subject that I came to the conclusion that his affairs must be in very good order, and that the building of the new house at Sicaster had not ruined him, as Aunt Caroline had once feared it would. Indeed, calling at the house on my way to Sicaster station, in order to pay my respects to Mrs. Benjamin Harrington, I found evidences of prosperity and comfort there, and was quite inclined to believe that the brewing trade was as brisk as ever.

About a month after returning to London I took my proper holiday, and went down to Devonshire to spend a fortnight with Uncle Richard and Sylvia before their return to town. And by this time being on sufficiently confidential terms with Uncle Richard to tell him anything, and feeling justified in letting him know what was being said of him with relation to Sylvia, I told him of the conversation between Uncle Benjamin and myself. He listened attentively, and very much to my astonishment did not fly into

one of his usual passions—storms which flared up and died away in an instant. On the contrary, he was cool even to indifference.

"Well, Gerard, my lad," he said, when I had finished, "there's no fresh news in that. Sophia and Benjamin are of the suspicious order. Frances and Caroline are much less so, but even they don't quite understand why I should act as a protector to Sylvia. Why I do, my son, is not their business, but mine."

"And—Sylvia's," I remarked, meaningly.

Uncle Richard was mixing colours on a palette. He looked up sharply and cocked his beard at me.

"Eh?" he said.

"It must be Sylvia's business to know who her parents were," I said. "That, I suppose, was what Uncle Benjamin meant when he said that—that you were doing her harm."

Then Uncle Richard showed some sign of anger—the first.

"Why, confound it all, boy!" he exclaimed. "Of course she knows—got it all as pat as the alphabet. Father, Charles Leighton; mother, Cecilia Leighton. Doesn't she wear her mother's wedding ring; hasn't she a box full of things that belonged to both of them; doesn't she draw a little annuity every year which they left her? Benjamin and Sophia are fools—damned fools!"

Then he suddenly calmed down again, after a biting remark on the charity of so-called Christians, followed up by another in which he dismissed the mental equipments of his eldest brother and sister in a cutting epigram. To take his mind off the matter—for he was given to fuming and fretting about things—I mentioned how I had come to hear the name of

his brother John for the first time. He listened attentively.

"Aye," he said, "that's a sore subject with the proud Harringtons. I'm not one of the proud Harringtons, boy; I'm the humble Harrington. You see, John was a bit of a bad egg. There always is one in every family, they say. I believe"—here he broke off to laugh and chuckle for a good minute—"I really believe that Sophia thinks, and poor Fanny fears, there are two in our family. I'm the other. Ha, ha!"

"And was Uncle John——" I began.

"He got into a little difficulty over some trust money that had been placed in his hands," replied Uncle Richard. "That's the fact. The family put matters straight, and John went abroad."

"He went to Canada, didn't he?" I asked.

"That's right; he went to Canada," answered Uncle Richard. "Canada."

"And died there, didn't he, Uncle Dick?"

"That's right, too—he died at Quebec," replied Uncle Richard. "A mort of time ago, as old Wraby might say. Oh, yes, that's old history in our family, Jerry, my son—very ancient history."

"What—what was Uncle John like?" I inquired.

Uncle Richard wagged his beard and his pipe.

"He was uncommonly like Sophia—he liked to have his own way, and his own say, and to do as he pleased," he answered, chuckling. "But Sophia's likings, fortunately, are in the right directions; poor John's ran in the wrong ones."

"How is it that Uncle John was never talked about, and is never mentioned now?" I inquired suddenly.

Uncle Richard looked up sharply from his painting and made a critical inspection of me through the masses and tangles of his hair.

"Why, my lad," he said, "where are your powers of observation? Don't you know that every Harrington that ever was born, except myself, is a slave to Mrs. Grundy? Bethink you—Mrs. Winterbee's husband's partner has occupied the mayoral chair at Kingsport; Mrs. Benjamin's papa has dignified a similar position at Sicaster. It would not do to have these grandeurs stained by—Uncle John, eh? Do you see? If you don't—look a little deeper. What makes Mrs. Winterbee so much concerned about Sylvia? Because she doesn't want her social position to be endangered—that's why. It's awkward to have a naughty brother who 'doesn't care for appearances or for what the next-door neighbour says. However, we will worry along."

We had no difficulty in worrying along pleasantly enough during my stay in Devonshire, and we all went back to town together in high spirits—Uncle Richard, because he had done some excellent work; Sylvia, because she was about to appear in the biggest part she had yet attempted; I, because my historical novel was finished, and had gained the approval of these two critics of the hearth to whom I could always look for the unbiassed truth.

CHAPTER XIV.

GOLDEN OCTOBER.

IT was within a week of our return to town, in the first days of the most beautiful October I have ever known, that I was suddenly lifted, all in one day, into a new world, or, rather, into two new worlds which, after completely turning my head with their various intoxications, agreeably fused themselves into one wherein I could think clearly and marvel that I had ever come to inhabit it.

At eight o'clock one morning I was breakfasting in my sitting-room, when Arabella came panting up the stairs with my letters. They were few in number —one from MacTavish, who was still on his native heath, a note from Sylvia, a thickish communication from Aunt Caroline, who liked to write long letters, and a book catalogue or two. But I picked out a strange letter from this small collection with an unerring eye. Before I turned it over I knew whence it came. It was from the publisher to whom I had submitted my historical novel.

It is usually supposed that letters of this description—letters which are charged with fate—are eagerly torn open by feverish fingers. I did not tear my letter open—in strict truth, I left it lying on the slice of dry toast whereon I had hastily dropped it after seeing what it was, and stared at it for a full minute before I took it up again. During that minute a good many thoughts flashed through my

mind. I lived again through all the hopes and fears with which I had worked. I remembered the feeling which came over me when, at last, after some months of regular labour, the last word was written. I saw the whole story in a sudden glare of mental illumination—the characters and scenes passed in a swift panorama. Then my thoughts became more practical. Acting on Uncle Richard's advice, I had submitted the work to one of the best known publishers of the day, and it was barely a month since the manuscript had been placed in his hands—could it be possible that it had already been judged, and approved or condemned? If so, surely its fate was—condemnation. I was prepared for anything in the shape of rejection when I opened the letter to learn my news; it seemed scarcely possible that I could hope to find success straight off. But there it was—a brief, laconic letter in the famous publisher's own handwriting. He was quite willing to publish my novel; he would pay me so much for the right to print an edition of so many copies; if these terms were agreeable to me he would propose an agreement for my signature, and would bring the work out—in three volumes—almost immediately. That was all. But was more needed to send an ambitious youngster into the seventh heaven of bliss?

I made great haste over the rest of my breakfast—I was still too young to leave good food unfinished—and over my preparations for departure City-wards. Passing through the newsagent's shop and lending library, I looked at the rows of three-volume novels with an air of familiarity, mixed, I fear, with less reverence than I should have felt the day before. I was about to join their ranks—in a new uniform.

After a time, when I had become a little dingy—and second-hand—Arabella would be handling me and lending me out to her customers. I thought once of telling her that I was on the way to be put into her keeping, but refrained out of consideration for her. She was always wanting a new sensation, Arabella; she should have one by suddenly discovering my name on a title-page.

It was a very beautiful morning, that. A warm, bright morning, with that benignant spirit in the air which one only gets when October comes full ripe and mellow. The soft sunlight danced very pleasantly on the Islington roofs and the Islington streets, and my thoughts danced with it. Round about the Angel there were a great many men who I am sure were thirsty, and would have liked pots of four-half had they possessed the means wherewith to purchase them. I felt that it would have been the proper thing to take them all inside that famous hostelry in order to drink my health, but I shrank from the task of explaining why it should be drunk at such an early hour of that particular morning. I was sorry for them—I would have treated all of them with pleasure, and everybody between there and St. Paul's, too.

At any rate there should be no work for me that day. We had now a much larger staff at the Drake establishment, and for some time I had not only been remunerated on a somewhat higher scale, but had enjoyed the services of a clever youth as assistant. He had a natural aptitude for such things as reading proofs and bullying foremen printers, and knew more than I did myself. Moreover, I was now independent of Drake, who was well aware that one article of

mine in the *Lantern* brought me in as much money as a whole week's work for him did, and by this time was satisfied if I gave a general supervision to my particular duties. So I gave my assistant instructions for the day on arriving at the office, left a note on Drake's desk, and set off for Keppel Street, bursting with news and importance.

Uncle Richard and Sylvia were at breakfast. They always breakfasted in the studio, Uncle Richard having some eccentric liking to sit near his work for the day before beginning on it. As I entered and found them thus engaged, it struck me more than ever what a sense of companionship there always was about these two. They looked particularly comfortable, that morning. There was a bright fire burning in the corner fireplace; in front of it stood the breakfast table, bright and dainty with its snowy linen and delicate china and fresh autumn flowers—Uncle Richard was one of the most fastidious of men in these matters. Over against it, in a clear light, stood the picture on its easel on which he was just then engaged. And, as usual, he and Sylvia were criticising it.

They both stared and exclaimed when I burst in, for I was not in the habit of walking in upon them at that hour, except on holidays and Sundays. But Sylvia's quick eyes saw that the reason of my appearance was one of joyousness. She jumped to her feet, clapping her hands. And, woman-like, she spoilt the grand effect I was going to produce.

"Gerard's novel is taken!" she cried, and ran to me and shook both my hands and kissed me on both cheeks.

I was taken aback altogether, and stared at her.

"But how did you know, Sylvia?" I asked.

She laughed, and twisted me round in front of a mirror.

"Why, it's written all over you!" she said. "Look at yourself. You're as proud as a turkey-cock. Of course I knew."

"Is it true, boy?" asked Uncle Richard.

"Yes; it's true," I answered, and pulled out the letter which had made such a difference in my fortunes. Sylvia hung over his shoulder to read it; she told me afterwards that she was quite surprised to find such glorious news conveyed in such prosaic language in ordinary black ink on ordinary letter-paper.

"That's the style!" said Uncle Richard, folding up the letter. He shook hands with me solemnly, his beard wagging like the arm of a semaphore. Then, diving into a pocket of his capacious knicker-bockers, he fumbled about, and presently pulling out what seemed to be a bit of crumpled paper, thrust it by main force into my waistcoat pocket, with the remark that I was still a boy, and not a bit too old to be tipped, and I must go forth and buy myself five pounds' worth of new books to commemorate this great day. After which, he fled abruptly into a small conservatory which opened out of the studio, and was heard making a great noise amongst watering-cans and flower-pots. Sylvia followed his retreat with smiling eyes.

"This will give Dick more pleasure than a success of his own," she said. "Anything that you or I do always pleases him."

"I shall dedicate my book to Uncle Richard," I said. "I say, Sylvia, won't it look fine, in three

volumes? And to see one's name in the advertisements! And in the reviews. I shall take great delight in sending all the papers to Uncle Benjamin, carefully marked."

"I suppose," said Sylvia, eyeing me over with a doubtful air, "I suppose you will inform Lady Andalusia Trewithen of this huge leap into the future without delay?"

"Sylvia," said I, ingratiatingly, "do you think—I mean would it be—do you think it would be too early to call there—now? Because, you see, I should like Lady Andalusia to know as—as soon as anybody. Next to you and Uncle Richard, you know."

"No-o, I don't suppose it would," answered Sylvia. "Good news and bad news can't afford to wait."

"Then I'm off!" I said. "I—I feel, somehow, that Andalusia ought to be told at once."

I hunted out Uncle Richard and said good-morning to him, and promised to come to dinner on the following Sunday, and hurried off. In the hall Sylvia pinned me by my shoulders against the wall, and made a careful inspection of me. She shook her head.

"Gerard Emery," she said, "I believe you're more in love than ever. Aren't you?"

"I thought we had decided that I was not to be," I protested.

She shook me impatiently.

"Answer my question!" she insisted.

"I am very fond of somebody," I confessed. "Can't help it, somehow. It's a sort of inevitable feeling."

Sylvia searched my eyes. Then she kissed my cheek.

"Well, I suppose it must run its course, Gerard," she said. "If only it brings you happiness, why, then——"

She paused, nodding her head at me.

"Yes, then——?" I questioned her.

"Why, then, of course, all will be well, foolish boy!" she said, laughing. "There, be off—you are bursting to tell her your news. Good luck, Gerard—in everything."

She waved her hand to me when I turned at the corner of the street, and Uncle Richard coming to the door at that moment waved a watering-can, wherewith he was about to refresh the plants which ornamented his steps. A bright shower of diamond-like drops glittered in the October sun and fell over Sylvia; as I ran off she was shaking them from her hair, and endeavouring to dispossess Uncle Richard of the can. And looking back again after I had gone half the length of the street I saw her watering the plants while Uncle Richard, leaning against the door-post, was blowing forth mighty clouds of smoke and watching the operation with a critical eye. I could not help thinking as I caught this last glimpse of them how well Uncle Richard and Sylvia fitted in with each other's moods. Each had certain eccentricities of character; neither was the easiest person in the world to get on with. There were moments when Uncle Richard was a savage bear; there were times when Sylvia had—tempers. Both were best left alone on those occasions, but they themselves seemed to understand exactly what it meant that such occasions should come. The truth was that there was a strong bond of sympathy between them, and that they understood each other in everything

that mattered. In the things which did not matter they took no concern or interest.

I thought it would be very nice if I were as famous as Uncle Richard, and could make as much money as he did, and had a house full of old furniture and curiosities, and a big study and library, crammed with books, and Andalusia as the presiding genius of everything. Yes, there was no doubt about it, I decided—I could not get Andalusia out of my head. I connected everything with her. If I wrote a particularly good article—or what I considered to be one—for the *Lantern*, I wondered if Andalusia would like it; now that I was really going to be published I invested Andalusia with the greater part of my new story. I suppose I ought to have considered myself a presumptuous, conceited young ass. But I never had any such feeling: the frank comradeship which had existed between Andalusia and myself in the old days at the Manor House had broken down all barriers between us for ever. If she had been a princess of the blood royal I should have thought of her as Andalusia, the desirable woman whom no rank could rob of—herself.

I have said that the *ménage* of Andalusia's noble parent was at that time of a very modest sort—it was housed in a quiet suite of rooms which the Earl, I am sure, had rented furnished. The only servant I ever saw there was an extremely solemn, placid mannered individual who rejoiced in the name of Boycey—I think he was really the landlord of the house, and acted as butler, footman, and valet. I used to observe him closely—he had the most inscrutable countenance I ever looked upon, and when he answered the door used to gaze far above the

head of whoever it was that summoned him with calm, emotionless eyes, which seemed to be fixed on a vision. Yet I daresay that those eyes saw more than they seemed to see, and that this patient non-committal expression was the result of long years of looking out on some of the strangest of life's vistas.

I do not know whether Mr. Boycey noticed any signs of great eagerness in my face when he opened the door to me, but he must have been singularly unobservant if he did not see that I was sorely disappointed when he informed me that Lady Andalusia was not at home. Perhaps he did see this, for he added, almost confidentially, that her ladyship had gone to walk in the Park. Furthermore, having observed, doubtless, that Lady Andalusia was always very kind and gracious to me on my previous visits, he volunteered the further information that her ladyship could scarcely have turned the corner of the street.

Having been tipped myself that morning I tipped Mr. Boycey. He accepted my *largesse* with a meek gratitude which would have looked well on canvas. I tried to walk down the steps with dignity, conscious that Mr. Boycey's eyes were upon me. When I heard the door close—very softly—I began to walk fast. At the corner I ran—then pulled myself up. Then I thought I was going the wrong way and turned back—then reflected that from that point anybody going into the Park would naturally enter by Stanhope Gate, and so turned back again. Then, what with anxiety to find Andalusia, and anxiety lest I should not find her, and anxiety lest when I did find her I should find her in somebody else's company, I lost my head, and getting into the Park had almost

become witless, when I suddenly came face to face with her.

For the second time I was conscious of an almost insurmountable shyness and diffidence. Her presence robbed me of coherent speech. I forgot that I had run nearly all the way from Keppel Street, had been plunged into the depths of disappointment to find her out, had soared again into the heights of hope on learning that she had walked into the Park, and had rewarded Boycey beyond his deserts or my poor means. I suppose I bungled through some form of excuse for my sudden appearance: I am not sure that I did not want to run away. The fact was I never could look at Andalusia without having my inflammable heart filled with all sorts of delightful and yet tormenting feelings—and upon this particular morning she occasioned these flutterings, these longings, these despairs, more than ever.

However, I was presently in something like a sane state of mind again, and able to speak and act sensibly. Up to then I had, I think, observed upon the fineness of the morning at least half-a-dozen times, torn a new glove completely in two in frantic efforts to get it on—sudden encounters with Andalusia always making me wish I had something to do with my hands—and twice come into collision with perambulators, tenanted by affrighted children and drawn by irate nurses who must have thought me drunk. I came out of all this agitation to find myself going under the trees with Andalusia at my side. And quite easily and naturally, as if she were quite certain that I had some, she asked me what great news I was bursting with. Here, again, I relapsed into a terrible state of tongue-tiedness, and was

obliged to pull out the publisher's letter and hand it to her. And I was once more flung head and crop into that delirious whirlpool of hopes and fears and indefinite dreams when I saw Andalusia's eyes brighten with sincere pleasure, and a new glow flush her cheek. She was glad because I was glad.

"This is splendid news, Gerard!" she said, and it was much more splendid to hear her address me familiarly than to know that I was going to see myself in three volumes at the libraries. "Grand news! I shall be afraid of you now. Perhaps you will become a celebrity straight off."

I hastened to assure her that if I became as famous as Shakespeare himself, of which there was quite a remote possibility, I should never give her cause to be afraid of me, and, emboldened by enthusiasm, I dared to protest that nothing, nothing in the world, could have given me more pleasure than to tell her of this first success. She heard all this with great kindness and indulgence, and inquired if I had told my friends of this noteworthy event. I replied that I had called at Keppel Street on my way to her, and made her laugh very much by telling her how Uncle Richard had given me a five-pound note as if I were a schoolboy who had passed a stiff examination or made a big score at cricket.

"That was nice of him," she said. "And I suppose you are going to spend the rest of the day in hunting round the old book-shops. Because you must naturally make a day like this into a sort of sacred occasion."

"I am not going to do any work to-day, at any rate," I answered. "I should like, if I could, to go right out into the country and stand on a hill-top."

"So should I," said Andalusia, with much fervour.
"It would be delightful on such a perfect day."

A sudden idea, of such magnificence, such splendid possibility, broke out in my soul, and burnt itself into a compelling flame.

"Let us go into the country and stand on a hill-top," I said, my voice sounding a long way off.

Andalusia looked at me quickly. Her eyes sparkled.

"What, you and I—together—to-day?" she said.

"Why not?" said I, speaking as calmly as I could, and staring over the tops of the houses in Park Row. "It is a splendid day for the country and the hill-tops."

She laughed gaily.

"Very well," she said. "Let us go—this minute."

That was the tone and spirit of the Andalusia of the Wintersleave days. The old love of adventure was aroused—Andalusia was ready to fly to the moon. As things were, we fled to the Surrey hills—they being the only altitudes I could think of within measurable distance of London. MacTavish and I had once spent an afternoon upon them, and had found the prospects pleasing.

I was very proud, indeed, to escort Andalusia to the station. For the greater part of the way down to Guildford we had a compartment to ourselves. I became in some sort Andalusia's proprietor. Arrived at Guildford I insisted upon going to the best hotel in the place and having lunch. Andalusia said that I was burning to change Uncle Richard's five-pound note. I retorted that I had real gold in my pockets, quite independent of that, and that this was a Great Occasion. I assumed grand airs with

the waiter, and begged Andalusia to let us have champagne, which she very wisely refused for both of us, telling me when the waiter's back was turned to be a good little boy and take a glass of ale, which would, she said, do me much more good than wine. There was no one in the coffee-room but ourselves, and the waiter discreetly left us to ourselves as much as possible. It was a delightful thing to sit there at a round table in a bow window, and to see Andalusia sitting opposite, and to know that she and I had all the afternoon before us.

In the mellow gold of the October afternoon we walked to Newland's Corner, taking our time by the way, and constantly pausing to look at this or that and to rest at wayside gates and stiles. The day was very clear, and the prospects were far-reaching; there was a refreshing calm in the air, and London seemed a wide world away. Even that morning seemed to have receded to some far-back period, and to have become a wraith-like memory.

We sat down to rest at this point. Andalusia was very quiet—she sat staring at the valley below us, and at the wooded ridge beyond, but it seemed to me that she saw something a long way off. And quite suddenly she turned to me with a sort of appealing confidence in her eyes.

"You have thought me changed since the Wintersleave days, Gerard?" she said quietly.

"Yes," I answered.

"How am I changed?"

"You are quieter—more subdued—you don't laugh so much."

"Ah!—you liked me better when I laughed, and played practical jokes, and was a tom-boy?"

"No, I didn't. I—I like you much better now—much better."

"Really?"

"Really."

"But why, Gerard?"

I hesitated, not desiring just then to blurt out all that was in my mind.

"I suppose you are a woman now," I said at last. "That must be the reason. You're—much nicer than when you were a girl."

"That's candid," she said, smiling. "So you don't like too much laughter? I used to laugh a great deal, didn't I?"

"I do like to hear you laugh," I protested. "But there is something soft—and—and I don't know what in your voice now that was not there before. And sometimes I think—"

"Yes?" she said, as I paused. "What is it?"

"Sometimes I think you are in trouble. And that—hurts me."

She gave me a quick look, and for a second laid her hand on mine and pressed it. And she bent her head and began to pluck nervously at the moss which cropped out of the grey stones on which we were sitting. After a time she spoke, very slowly, and in a very low voice.

"I cared for somebody—perhaps a good deal—two years ago," she said.

It seemed to me that a sudden darkness swept over the soft golden glory of this autumn afternoon, and that a sharp chilliness, as of an icy wind, came with it. So Sylvia had been right, after all! Why, yes, of course!—and what reason was there why she should not have been?



"ANDALUSIA CONTINUED TO PLUCK AT THE MOSS."

(p. 239.)

"Yes?" I said.

Andalusia continued to pluck at the moss.

"I—I think he—cared for me, too," she said. "But—nothing was ever said, and he went abroad—to India—and was killed. Shot."

I turned and looked at her. There were tears, which she never shed, in her eyes. This time it was I who laid my hand on hers.

"I am sorry," I said.

"Yes," she answered, "I knew that. Do you think I should have told you if I hadn't felt that you would be sorry? I have never spoken of it to anybody but you. Thank you, Gerard."

Then she suddenly sprang to her feet and gave me a quick, bright smile.

"Come!" she said. "Never mind ourselves. We mustn't spoil your day, Gerard. Let us walk—and talk. Come!"

I knew then—as, indeed, I believe I had known ever since Sylvia and I encountered her at the picture gallery—that whatever might come of it I should love Andalusia all my life. And the day was golden again and the air warm with fresh hope ere we went down from the hill-tops.

CHAPTER XV.

LIMELIGHT.

NEITHER Mr. Winterbee nor Uncle Benjamin Harrington could have had any cause to complain of the behaviour of our small off-shoot colony in London at this time so far as regards money-earning was concerned. Uncle Richard's big Devonshire picture: "A Devonshire Lane: Early Autumn," at which he had worked all day long on the spot for two months, and finished off with jealous care on his return, was sold for a sum that made my mouth water, and constrained me for a moment or two to wish that I could use brush and pencil to such effect. I said as much to Uncle Richard when he exhibited the cheque which had just been paid him to Sylvia and myself (he was fond of sharing such pleasures with us, and would, I am sure, have shared the money too—as he did in other ways—if we had given him a hint that that would be a sporting thing to do), and he wagged his head and said I should be earning money when he was dead, and that anyway I had been able to earn at least a guinea a week at a time of life when he could not depend upon ten shillings. He said also that you never knew the value of money unless you had found it very hard to get hold of, and for once in a way uttered some remarkable economic truths which would have pleased Mr. Winterbee, possibly because they were so very obvious. Sylvia reminded him that he was always given to enuncia-

ting these doctrines at the time of receipt of custom ; he replied that he was not addressing himself but us, who, as we were beginning to earn a little money for ourselves, were in need of good advice as to our bestowal of it. He remarked, with a groan, that it must be a nice feeling to know that you had something handsome invested in gilt-edged securities, a comfortable balance at your bankers, and a drawer full of sovereigns in your desk. That, he said, was a blissful state of things which he had always desired to attain, but was now without hope of attaining. Sylvia and I said nothing in reply to this—we knew quite well that amongst other of Uncle Richard's eccentricities was one of keeping money loose in a cigarette-box in his studio, and of telling certain needy young artists and various old pensioners who came to him for assistance to help themselves. It was as natural to him to give in this way as for the rains to fall in February, and I am sure that if anyone went to him on Wednesday who had already been helped on Tuesday he would have forgotten all about the first transaction, and been quite ready to carry out the second.

As for my own modest share in good fortune at that time, it consisted first of all of a cheque from my publisher, the gratifying news that the first edition of my novel had been sold out on publication, an engagement on the regular staff of the *Lantern*, and a consequent farewell to the Drake establishment. I began to feel that I was fairly on my feet ; the hall-mark of excellence was placed upon me by the approval of Mr. and Mrs. Winterbee, who, being in town just about then, invited me to dine with them at their hotel, and gave evidence that they

thought I was doing well. My Aunt Sophia, however, in a private conversation with me, still clung to the belief that nature had intended me to be a chemist and druggist, and held before me the example of an individual in Kingsport who, beginning life behind the counter (as her husband, William, did, she took care to remind me—though in a different line of business), had qualified, set up for himself, invented a pill, and made so much out of it that he was now a very rich man, and had attained every civic honour possible.

It was Sylvia, however, who came most prominently before the public that autumn. Her new part, though far from being a principal one, suited her peculiar style and power admirably, and I sometimes heard conversations between herself, Uncle Richard, and Mr. Courtney, as to the possibilities of her undertaking something big and ambitious in the coming year. Mr. Courtney's season was to conclude early in December; he suggested that Sylvia should take a long rest and study a principal part, in readiness for a spring or summer season—the question to be settled was, what part? Uncle Richard was all for Lady Macbeth—it was one of his crazes to see Sylvia in this rôle, but I am sure that she and Mr. Courtney and myself felt that if she played it under his supervision a descent from the tragic to the comic might be an easier matter than he supposed, or, indeed, dreamt of. He insisted that Lady Macbeth had red hair, and that any actress who attempted to portray her as she really was must wear a red wig and rely on facial expression rather than on any traditions and technicalities which had so far been sacred. He claimed, too, that Macbeth and his wife

and their immediate entourage were in all probability habited in little more than rags and tatters, and offered to work out the dresses and scenery on what he called the true archæological lines. Not even Sylvia was convinced, and Mr. Courtney sighed deeply and said that no doubt the real Lady Macbeth was a vixen, and had red hair, and possibly a red nose, but he was afraid the public would never stand the dressing of her as if she were a comic housemaid playing in private theatricals. At this Uncle Richard swore a great deal, and said that some day we should have a real theatre where people who could act would play to people who understood acting, and launched off into a diatribe against actor-managers, bad taste, and the general decay of the drama, which, if something fortunate had not interrupted it, would, as we all knew very well, have lasted for hours.

"What we want," he said with a final growl, "is a man who has sufficient imagination to realise possibilities. We've had enough of effete certainties, and mediocre probabilities—somebody must come along who'll put his money on a grand possible."

This sort of person came along, making urgent search in likely and unlikely quarters, not very long afterwards. It is scarcely necessary to say, seeing how things have gone since those days, that he came from the United States, and had no respect for traditions, reputations, or conventions. Nor need it be said that he knew exactly what he wanted to find, and did not mean to be put off with anything less than his requirements. And dropping in—as he put it—at the Athenæum in the course of a pilgrimage round the London theatres, he decided that Miss

Sylvia Leighton was one of the things he was looking for, and, American-like, made all possible haste to secure her.

I found this enterprising person in Uncle Richard's studio one afternoon. He was engaged in expounding his views. He had an American accent, but a German name—Mr. Scharff, of Scharff and Moser. He was a self-possessed, shrewd, quick-dealing sort of person—quiet in manner, obviously chary of wasting too many words, and having a rare gift of knowing exactly what he wanted to say. I was in time to hear the gist of his remarks. He had been much impressed by Sylvia's powers. She was what he called a Live actress. He and Mr. Moser were on the look out for Live actors and actresses. Incidentally, he put the vast majority of our actors and actresses on one side. We had a very select, but very small, circle of Big People—people who were tip-top in their profession—but you could count its members on your ten fingers. Outside it was circle after circle of others whose powers ranged from mediocrity to ineptitude. Mr. Scharff went so far, indeed, as to say that most of our actors and actresses were only superior to automata in the fact that they had the gift of speech and of movement. But he added that the pronunciation of words in a certain way, and the making of gestures upon a cut-and-dried pattern did not constitute acting, and he once more insisted on the virtues of Liveness. Finally he asked Sylvia to go over to the United States—where all the great chances are—and to put herself under the care of Messrs. Scharff and Moser.

This was Mr. Scharff's first attempt to land this particular fish. The second attempt was made a

week later, when he narrated to Sylvia, to Uncle Richard, and to myself, the story of a new play which he and his partner intended to produce in New York during the following spring. Mr. Scharff told it very well: he held our attention. There was a girl in the play; he made her live for us. She was just a poor girl, an ordinary working girl, forced by circumstances into big situations; a girl of primitive emotions, natural, elementary. It was a real live part, said Mr. Scharff, and needed a live actress. To conclude, he offered it to Sylvia.

Mr. Scharff left his fish to nibble undisturbed at this bait for a week or two, during which time he went over to Paris to see if there were any live young people rising there. While he was gone, Sylvia read the play of the poor ordinary girl, forced by circumstances into tragic situations, very carefully over with Uncle Richard and myself. It was a fine play, without a doubt—I confess that after reading it I was much more interested in the author, one of whose first productions it was, and whose name was, so far, unknown in England, than in the prospect of Sylvia's playing the principal part. There was something quite new and fresh in it—it was just a drama of ordinary, every-day life amongst ordinary, every-day people, and yet it got hold of one at the beginning and held one to the end. I began to understand what Mr. Scharff meant when he used the word "live."

Returning from Paris, Mr. Scharff waited upon Sylvia at Keppel Street and baited his line afresh. This time he was a man of still fewer words—indeed, he did little more than say "How-do-you-do?" and hand Sylvia a letter in which Messrs. Scharff and Moser made her a formal offer. He explained that

he was on his way to Liverpool, to catch the boat homewards, and he politely requested a definite answer from Miss Leighton within three weeks of that date.

I had a strong idea that if Sylvia had followed her own inclination she would have accepted the terms of Messrs. Scharff and Moser's letter there and then. They were managers of high standing, of acknowledged liberality, and of great influence, and their offer was a generous one. Mr. Courtney, called in to advise, had nothing whatever to say against an acceptance of it, but that Sylvia was still young. I think Uncle Richard snatched at this as the only straw in the stream.

"The child is much too young to go off to the States in a trying part like that," he said to me as I sat with him one evening, Sylvia, of course, being at the Athenæum. "Only nineteen, or, at any rate, scarcely twenty. And I don't see how I could go—I don't want to paint Yankee scenery, however fine it is."

"Would that be necessary?" I asked.

"She couldn't go alone!" he almost shouted. "What's the lad talking about? Haven't I taken care of her ever since she was—"

I think he was going to say "born," but he pulled himself up with a fierce "Ugh!" and took a pull at his grog, to the accompaniment of which he was smoking one of his clay pipes.

"I should never know what she was after," he presently said, in a grumbling voice. "America isn't next door."

I made out from this—with no effort—that Uncle Richard did not wish to lose Sylvia. I further made

out—with the aid of a little extra observation, women being more subtle in the concealment of their feelings than men—that while Sylvia wanted to go to the United States she was not minded to go without Uncle Richard. I think that Uncle Richard had formed a sort of conception of what it would be like to go there with her—he would have to dance attendance from New York to Boston, from Philadelphia to Chicago; there would be no rest for him, and no chance of painting steadily. And at this time he was painting harder than ever. So, during the next week or two, he looked glum and bearish, and when the project was mentioned, wagged his beard a great deal and made remarks about Sylvia's health, and her youth, and the doubtfulness of the experiment, occasionally supplementing remarks and looks with reflections upon the bad taste of the Yankee in most matters of Art. Every time that I went to Keppel Street during this period of uncertainty I came away wondering whether Sylvia would remain on this side of the Atlantic for the present or if I should go some day to Euston to see her and Uncle Richard setting out for Liverpool.

But events were shaping themselves, and more of us were going to be concerned in them than any of us guessed at. Mr. Scharff evidently did things in ways peculiar to himself. About a fortnight after his departure for New York, and while Sylvia was endeavouring, between family consultations, private consultations, and business consultations, to decide upon a definite course of action, there appeared in the theatrical and in some of the general newspapers certain paragraphs which announced that Messrs. Scharff and Moser had almost completed negotiations

with that talented, rising young actress, Miss Sylvia Leighton, which would result in her appearance in a great part at the Grand Cosmopolitan Theatre, New York, early in the following spring.

"Mr. Scharff seems somewhat certain that he will land his fish," said Sylvia, seeing one of these paragraphs.

"He knows how to turn on the limelight," growled Uncle Richard. "Why couldn't he wait until you gave him a decisive answer? Of course, this will be exaggerated into a positive acceptance."

A few days later, as I was sitting down to a late lunch after a hard morning's work, Arabella came panting up the stairs with a telegram—the first, oddly enough, that I had ever received at my lodgings—and, when she had recovered her breath, said feelingly that she hoped nobody was dead. I could see quite well that she was disappointed when I replied in the negative, but she grew brighter when I assured her that I would let her know as soon as there was a death in my family. I understood Arabella—too much acquaintance with library novels at third-hand, too much purveying of cheap fiction, too much sleep, and too many meals, had made her susceptible to new sensations, and up to now I had had none to give her of the sort she wanted. Had I requested her, after I had read my telegram, to go out with me, I could have treated her to a sensation which might have pleased her. But I myself did not know what was to follow upon my going out.

The telegram was from Uncle Richard—it merely said, "Come here at once, please, boy." I made haste to finish my lunch, changed my clothes, and set off to Keppel Street by the shortest straight-cut.

Uncle Richard was alone in his studio. I saw at once that he was fearfully upset and wildly angry. He was painting away at a big canvas which, as I knew, he had not touched for years—his brush slashed and slapped at it as if he were a house-painter working by the job. His beard and his pipe wagged ominously; out of his lips rolled mighty clouds of tobacco smoke. On a table near his easel stood a spirit case and a basket of soda-water bottles; a large tumbler was half full of brandy and soda. And Uncle Richard's eye, turned on me as I entered, was fiery and almost malevolent. Of Sylvia there was no sign.

"What's the matter, Uncle Dick?" I inquired.
"Has anything happened?"

Uncle Richard blew out another mighty cloud of smoke, took a pull at his brandy-and-soda, shook his head fiercely, and smacked his canvas so hard with a large brush that the sound re-echoed through the studio.

"Matter!" he exclaimed. "Look there, boy—read that filthy rag! Read it—and then we'll go and cram it down somebody's throat."

He pointed to a paper lying on the table near him. I picked it up, surprised to see it there. It was a paper, sold in the streets, which retailed any scandal or gossip that it could get hold of—a paper wherein it was an insult, an outrage, to be named. And somebody had marked a passage with blue pencil—marked it with big, heavy underscorings—and I saw at a glance that it referred to Uncle Richard and to Sylvia. There was not much of it, but the little there was was quite sufficient to cause Sylvia untold grief. As I knew, there had never, at

any time, been in her mind a single doubt, or shadow of a doubt, as to the truth of Richard Harrington's story of her parentage—here that story was laughed at, flouted positively, however indistinctly. I put the thing back on the table feeling that I stood on the threshold of some new region of life which I had no desire to cross.

"Has Sylvia seen—that?" I asked.

Uncle Richard swore a great oath. It seemed to do him good.

"No!" he answered more calmly. "But what is to keep it from her? The probability is that she's already seen it. She's gone to a matinée—these ghouls will have posted a copy there. This came here just after she had gone out."

"What are you going to do?" I asked.

"Thrash the man who printed it within an inch of his life!" he growled.

"But, Uncle Richard," I urged, "that will do no good. It would only attract more notice and arouse scandal."

He growled again, and, throwing his brush down, began to clean his palette. From the way in which he gnawed his moustache I could see that the fierce Harrington temper was raging hotly within him.

"I should not be at all surprised," I continued, seeing that he was not going to speak just then, "if this paragraph were traced back to its source, to find that that source is young Tom Harrington."

Uncle Richard flashed a quick interrogation upon me.

"Tom," I replied, "is, as you know, in London. He believes himself to be a man about town—in his way. He was in the company of what he described

as writing fellows some time ago, and there was some conversation as to Sylvia's exact relationship to you——”

“What?” roared Uncle Richard.

“I am relating what Thomas told me. He said nothing at the time, but he was ass enough to speak of the matter later on before a man named Sanderson, who is, I have since discovered, a penny-a-lining sort of gentleman of a rather low order. Anyway,” I continued, seeing that Uncle Richard was absorbed and astonished, “this paragraph is merely a heightened version of what Tom said to Sanderson, on his own confession to me.”

Uncle Richard drank off his brandy-and-soda and snatched up a cloak that lay where he had flung it down when he had last taken it off. He crammed an old slouched hat on his head. As his hair was more than usually dishevelled and his eyes wild with anger, he looked very formidable, and I am not sure that I was over well pleased when he bade me go with him.

He snatched up a stout walking-cane as he hurried through the hall, and bade me furnish myself in the same fashion.

“We may want them,” he said grimly and significantly.

“Where are we going?” I inquired.

“First to the hole whence issues this filthy rag!” he said, his cane striking against the offending journal, which he carried, tightly clasped in one hand. “After that to see young Thomas. It will be a mercy for them if I don't lay about them with this stick.”

“But will that do any good?” I inquired

anxiously, knowing that any sort of fracas would make the matter more public.

Uncle Richard spat fiercely upon the pavement. He brandished his stick.

"Pish, boy!" he said. "There are times when even prudent men don't stop to ask whether a thing does any good or not. This needs a strong hand, and it shall have it."

He marched away, to the accompaniment of many curses, growled somewhere under the recesses of his bristling moustache, in the direction of Fleet Street, and travelled so fast that I had hard work to keep up with him. People stared at his strange figure—the flapping hat, the flowing cloak, the wild eyes and protruding beard, and made way for him on the pavement. I doubt if he saw them—he would have gone through a brick wall or the undergrowth of a virgin forest, I think, so resolute was he upon getting at grips with the people upon whom his wrath had fallen.

We found the office of the offending print in a little court off Fleet Street—a likely place in which to build a wasp's nest, said Uncle Richard, with a flourish of his walking-cane. He wasted no time in going to the attack—within a moment we were in the presence of a man who not only confessed that he was editor of the journal, but also proprietor.

Uncle Richard broke this man down by sheer force. He bullied, threatened, stormed at him until the object of his wrath was a nerveless wreck. The man admitted that the paragraph had been given to him by Sanderson, who had assured him that it was strictly true, and based on family information (I saw Uncle Richard's beard wag ominously here, and fore-

saw trouble for Master Thomas Harrington), and that there could be no objection to it on the score of untruth. I had expected him to fight a little, and perhaps to bluster, but he had recently served a term of imprisonment for criminal libel, and he became like a sucking dove in Uncle Richard's hands. And before we left the office we had seen every copy of the offending issue which remained unsold destroyed, the formes from which it had been printed broken up, and were in possession of an humble apology from the purveyor of lies and slanders, which saved him, I am sure, from a broken head.

"That's the way to do it, boy!" said Uncle Richard, as he strode forth with a parting word or two to the proprietor, which would have made any decent man sick with shame. "I wish we could step across Sanderson at this instant. As we can't, we will visit the *fons et origo*, and see what he says about it."

"I don't suppose we shall find Thomas in," said I, hoping fervently at the same time that we shouldn't, for I mistrusted the fashion in which Uncle Richard kept handling his walking-cane, and feared that he might go rather too far. "It's Cattle-Show week, you know, and his father and mother are in town, and he will sure to be with them."

"Where are they staying?" growled Uncle Richard.

I mentioned the name of Uncle Benjamin's hotel, which had been communicated to me by letter that morning from Aunt Frances, who was exceedingly anxious that I should call on my relatives. Uncle Richard growled still more deeply and fiercely, and laid a tighter hold upon the walking-cane.

"We'll look the young blackguard out at his work first," he said. "If he's not there we'll go to his lodgings, and if we don't find him there we'll try his father's hotel—we'll run him to earth, anyway. He shall have his gruel!"

"I don't think Tom is a blackguard," I ventured to suggest meekly. "He's an awful young fool, but—"

"Then we'll hammer some sense into him," snapped Uncle Richard. "Call that hansom there."

It was obvious that there was nothing to do but obey Uncle Richard while he was in this savage and terrible mood, so I got into the hansom beside him, and had the pleasure of hearing him growl all the way to Walworth. Now and then he leaned over the front of the cab and poked the horse with his cane, and when the driver expostulated Uncle Richard swore at him, and I am not certain that the driver did not think he had got hold of bad and drunken characters, especially when he saw that I, too, was armed.

We found Messrs. Booker and Hopper's establishment in a back street, being easily guided to it in the end by a combined odour of malt, hops, and freshly brewed ale. It was a big place, running round three sides of a large courtyard, wherein were several brawny fellows, in red caps and leather aprons, at whom Uncle Richard glared nearly as hard as they stared at him. Upon making inquiry of one of them (I was left to do all that, and to settle with the cabman, who seemed suspicious when I asked him to wait, and took care to post himself where he could keep an eye on us) we were directed to an office, further inquiry at which resulted in the infor-

mation that Mr. Thomas Harrington was somewhere on the premises. A shilling bestowed upon one of the red-capped gentlemen brought Mr. Thomas to our presence.

I would have warned Tom, if I could, much as I wanted to see him punished, but Uncle Richard stuck to me like a limpet to a rock as if he thought I might desert to the enemy. Tom turned waxy-yellow when he saw us and our canes ; the red-capped individuals, who had never ceased to stare at Uncle Richard as if he were a wild man of the woods, paused in their occupation of rolling and tossing huge barrels about, and placing their mighty arms akimbo evidently prayed that something might happen—as something immediately did.

It was a simple affair. I have already said that Uncle Richard, like all the Harringtons, had a very hot temper—on this occasion he appeared to lose command of it altogether. He demanded of Thomas what he meant by speaking of Sylvia to men like Letherby and Sanderson ; Thomas, oaf-like, attempted to carry the matter off with a fatuous grin and an air of superiority. Standing behind Uncle Richard I shook my head at Thomas, but without effect. Uncle Richard, with a Berserker roar, suddenly rushed upon him—the malacca fell upon Thomas's shoulders, arms, neck, like a flash ; one blow made his skull ring out like a drum.

“For Heaven’s sake, stop, Uncle Dick !” I entreated. “You’ll kill him !”

One of the brawny giants picked Uncle Dick up and carried him, kicking, struggling, swearing, to the cab at the gates. The cabman refused to take him in unless he promised not to prod the horse again.

I had a terrible time in calming both of them down, and in persuading Uncle Richard to go home. Looking back as we drove away I saw Cousin Thomas limping in the midst of the red-caps. His howls and expostulations still rang in my ears.

CHAPTER XVI.

UNCLE RICHARD'S SILENCE.

I WENT back with Uncle Richard to Keppel Street. He was outwardly quite calm by the time we reached the house, and during the last stages of our drive had talked of ordinary matters. But when we were safe in his studio, and he began to smooth himself with another brandy-and-soda and a cigar, he referred once more to the incidents of the afternoon.

"This is a nice thing to do!" he said. "Here is a girl, just setting out on what everybody agrees to be a promising career, pestered by a rag like that!"

"There is no great probability that Sylvia will see it, surely!" said I. "It's not very likely to come in her way."

"Humph!" grunted Uncle Richard. "Isn't it? If I know anything of human nature somebody will draw her attention to it. Likely enough, some of the women who must needs be jealous of her. I expect to hear that she has seen it."

"But there is really nothing to trouble about, is there?" I said. "The thing is so wickedly absurd. You, of course, could disprove such a foolish statement at once, if it were really necessary."

He gave me a quick look, almost as though he thought I were questioning him. He grasped my innocence of any intent in that way.

"If it were necessary!" he repeated. "Oh, yes,

of course, if it were necessary. But it's more than a pity, Gerard, my lad, if one's private affairs have to be trotted out to the public gaze simply because one becomes a bit famous. What business has the public with anybody's private affairs or home life? Let the public take its money's worth while those who amuse it are before them—not follow them home and expect another sixpenn'orth on this side the threshold."

"The penalties of ——" I began.

"Oh, damn that sort of foolishness, boy!" he snapped out. "Don't ever seem to agree with anything that interferes with our good old-fashioned English notions of the sanctity of private life. I tell you, Gerard, this new-fangled craze for personal gossip in the newspapers will sap a good deal of the best that's in us—nobody's affairs will be sacred. These fellows ought to be horsewhipped round the town—whether their journals are fashionable six-pennies or low rags sold at the kerbstone!"

"Such papers wouldn't come into supply if there wasn't a demand for them, surely," I said.

Uncle Richard shrugged his shoulders and made a grimace.

"We used to do without them well enough," he said. "And even in my time I can remember when a newspaper man would have been flogged within an inch of his life if he'd printed the private details that you can find on any club table in the society papers. No, sir, this is a scandal-loving, itching-eared age, and the next will be worse."

Then he reverted to the original cause of his anger, and said that he would not have had Sylvia annoyed in this way for all the world, and that he was

particularly incensed to find that such an abominable rumour should have emanated from a member of his own family, remarking, in conclusion, that they are ill birds who foul their own nests.

"I suppose Thomas—and his father and mother—would urge that Sylvia is not of the Harrington brood," said I, carrying on his simile. "You know how jealous Uncle Benjamin—and Aunt Sophia—are of what they call outsiders? And how suspicious they are of anything they don't quite understand?"

Uncle Richard began to laugh.

"Poor Sophia!" he said reflectively. "I know she has a strange liking to be admitted into all the secret chambers. And yet no one would be readier than she to tell people to mind their own business."

"Aunt Sophia will hear of this," I reminded him. "Thomas will make moan to his parents, and his parents will enlarge upon it to the Winterbees. And Mrs. Winterbee will say that she never was fond of mysteries, and that if you will be mysterious you must expect trouble. It will give her great pleasure to be able to say 'I told you so!'"

"And do you see anything so very mysterious, my lad?" he asked, suddenly ceasing to pace up and down the studio, and regarding me with a look of inquiry.

"No," I replied; "nothing. But I have been thinking this afternoon that——"

"Yes?" he said, seeing that I paused; "go on."

"I have been thinking that—that supposing you were dead, and some such rumour as this had been circulated about Sylvia, it might not have been easy for her to disprove it," I answered.

Uncle Richard wagged his beard a good deal at

that, and seemed to think hard. He presently remarked that he was not dead yet, and that whenever there were any battles to fight for Sylvia he was quite ready to fight them ; and, indeed, he seemed anxious to exhibit his prowess there and then, and was waiting for Sylvia to return and claim his interference.

I, too, was awaiting Sylvia's return from her morning performance with some anxiety—for some reason which I could not explain to myself I wanted to know if her attention had been called to the offending paragraph. I knew that she could only see it by having it specially pointed out to her, either by means of a marked copy of the sheet in which it appeared, or by the kind office of some candid friend. If it had come or did come to her notice—and I could not see how that could have been or would be prevented—what attitude would she take ? For, although I had answered Uncle Richard truthfully in saying that I saw nothing mysterious in his account of Sylvia's parentage, I was very well aware that she herself knew no more of her father and mother than he had told her, and that she might now, in face of this rumour, insist upon more of this story, whatever it was, being given to the world.

Sylvia however, did not come home at the time expected. Instead, she sent a message to the effect that she was going to dine with Mr. and Mrs. Courtney, and should return after the evening performance. It was a cheerful note, begging Uncle Richard not to be miserable, and counselling him to go to his club if he felt lonely.

"She has not heard anything—yet," said Uncle Richard, handing me the note. "It may be—it just may be—that she won't. But if she doesn't, well,

I'll begin to believe that the Lady Candours and Sir Benjamin Backbites are becoming extinct."

I stayed to dine with Uncle Richard; he had quite recovered his spirits and his equanimity ere dinner was over, and became very cheerful and amusing. We lingered some time over our coffee and cigarettes, and were just debating whether or not to stroll down to the Athenæum when the parlourmaid suddenly announced Mr. and Mrs. Benjamin Harrington.

Uncle Richard bade the girl bring his brother and sister-in-law in at once. He was standing on the hearthrug when the announcement of their arrival was made—a short, sturdy, masterful figure posted with his back to the fire and his hands under his coat-tails, in true British fashion—and he was still standing there, combative if not aggressive, when his visitors entered. His eyes looked fiery; his beard stiffened.

"These be the incensed parents, Gerard, lad," he whispered. "The baby boy has whined to his Ma, and Ma has coerced Pa into coming to kill the wicked Uncle. Well—let's see him try."

Mr. and Mrs. Benjamin Harrington were ushered into the room, the door was closed behind them; for a moment there was a dead silence. Uncle Richard gazed at them as a small judge might gaze at two large criminals. Uncle Benjamin would have made two of him; Mrs. Benjamin was a big woman; she, in her rustling black silk, and he, in his broad-cloth, looked very large, even colossal; Uncle Richard in his evening clothes looked a little man. But his attitude was stern; his mien was proud; his eyes were the eyes of the upholder of righteousness who

bends severe looks upon the doer of wickedness, and seems in one glance to ask that unfortunate individual what he has to say for himself.

There was no attempt at greeting between the two brothers—like old war-horses they seemed to scent battle in the air. Uncle Richard, however, bowed very politely to Mrs. Benjamin, and motioned me to hand her to an easy chair. He waved Benjamin to another, and once more became the haughty Englishman in his castle.

There was an awkward silence. Mrs. Benjamin, who was very flushed, seated herself in the chair I had drawn forward for her, untied her bonnet-strings, and would have been a silk-and-bead-trimming-clad statue of Outraged Maternal Love but for the fact that indignation or obesity made her short of breath. I saw her take in her surroundings in a rapid and comprehensive glance—she had never been under her brother-in-law's roof before, and was clever enough to recognise the taste and value of his household gods, and especially of the appointments of his table and the furnishing of his sideboard. I could see that under other circumstances she could have been very agreeable; as things were she was a scarcely-masked battery.

"Let me offer you a glass of wine," said Uncle Richard, chillily polite.

"Not any wine for me, I thank you," replied Mrs. Benjamin hastily, as I seized upon decanter and glass.

"Nor for me," chimed in Uncle Benjamin, shortly. He was still standing between the door and the table, slapping his walking stick against his leg, and watching his brother with a furtive air. He smiled—the old smile with the old sneer.

"I suppose you know what my wife and me have come here for?" he said, as if he would be greatly surprised to hear that Uncle Richard was really in ignorance of the reason of this unexpected visit.

"I should think—to beg my pardon," said Uncle Richard.

Mrs. Benjamin bridled as if somebody had suddenly struck a pin into her; Uncle Benjamin smote his leg so hard with his stick that the noise sounded like a pistol-shot.

"Oh!" he sneered. "To beg *your* pardon, eh? Dear me—we've come to beg his pardon, it seems, Martha. I thought differently, but, of course, one may be wrong—no doubt I am—no doubt I am!"

"You are. Quite wrong," said Uncle Richard.

"Perhaps not as wrong as you think," retorted the elder brother. "Don't you think to do as you like with me. I'm an older man than what you are, and a better man, and—"

Mrs. Benjamin raised a deprecating hand.

"Benjamin!" she said. "It's no use becoming angry, though, indeed, we've good cause to be. How your brother could misuse his own nephew so is beyond me. He can't have known what he was doing."

"Perfectly well, ma'am, perfectly well," said Uncle Richard. "I only wish I had the chance of doing it again."

"Do you know what you have done?" inquired Uncle Benjamin. "I'll just freshen your mind up a little. Do you know that you've cut my son's cheek open?"

"Plaster it up!" said Uncle Richard.

"And that the medical man says he may

have concussion of the brain?" continued Uncle Benjamin.

"The medical man is a born fool," replied Uncle Richard. "Brain, indeed!"

"I suppose you think my son hasn't got any brains?" snapped out Mrs. Benjamin.

"I'm sure he's no sense, ma'am," said Uncle Richard. "Neither common sense, nor good sense, nor kind sense—not even manly sense. And now let's talk a little common sense ourselves. Do you know what that young fool has done?—uttered lies and slanders against his own flesh and blood, his father's brother, whom he should have been brought up to respect, and, not content with that, has dragged an innocent girl's name into the matter. Do you know that?"

Mrs. Benjamin tossed her head and muttered something I could not catch. But Uncle Benjamin's heavy features were overspread with something very like malicious satisfaction. He sneered evilly.

"Oh, he told lies and slanders, did he? Deary me—what a pity! And what a good thing it will be to know that they are lies and slanders, and to have the real truth out!" said Uncle Benjamin, with a certain assumption of emotion which made me long to kick him. "There's some folks that's been wondering for a long time what the truth really was. I'm sure they'll be glad to know—I'm sure they will! Deary—me—lies and slander? Hum!—and not the truth?"

Uncle Richard looked at his elder brother gravely. His face suddenly lost its stern and haughty look—cleverly assumed—and became soft and almost wistful.

"Don't talk like that, Benjamin," he said, addressing his brother by his name for the first time. "You know very well that it's a cruel thing to slander me as your son has done, and still more cruel to drag a girl's name into it."

"Oh, I do, do I?" said Uncle Benjamin. "Then I don't. I know what it's pleased you to tell me and your sisters, or, rather, to tell them, for you never told me aught, and I'll just tell you once for all I don't believe you. That girl's your daughter, and——"

Mrs. Benjamin made a warning sound. Her eyes were fixed on something behind me. We all turned, Benjamin stopping short. And as I turned I knew that I was going to be sole spectator of a scene in a real life-drama.

Sylvia had entered the room. There was a divided curtain behind me which shut off the studio from the dining-room—she had run to the studio first to find Uncle Richard, and had burst upon us through the curtain. And she had heard Uncle Benjamin's last words.

She came forward—quickly. As she passed me I saw that she had evidently left the theatre in a hurry—she was partly dressed for her part, and had not even buttoned a large cloak which she had hastily thrown over her shoulders. In her hand she held—tightly crushed—a folded paper. I guessed what it was.

Uncle Richard took a step forward towards Sylvia and motioned her back.

"Go away, Sylvia," he said. "Wait until——"

His eyes turned with a significant arching of the eyebrows upon Mr. and Mrs. Benjamin Harrington.

Sylvia's glance followed his. She came to a standstill, shaking her head.

"No!" she said.

Uncle Richard snapped his fingers—a favourite habit of his when he was in a dilemma about anything—and turned away.

"Come into the studio with me, Sylvia," I urged, going close up to her. "Come. I'll explain to you."

"No!" she said again. "No! He'll explain."

She pointed at Uncle Benjamin: his face flushed and he looked at the table, at the floor, then at his wife.

"I heard what you said," Sylvia went on in a queer, half-in audible voice. "I know what you meant too. It's—it's in this paper—someone sent it to me to-night. It says—it says——"

She suddenly broke down—her bosom began to heave tumultuously. I had once seen Sylvia cry—it meant a storm. But she just as suddenly recovered herself and turned on Uncle Richard.

"Is it true?" she asked, looking intently at him.

Uncle Richard looked steadily back at her.

"No," he answered.

They stood staring at each other, apparently oblivious of the rest of us for a long moment. Then Sylvia's face, which had been white enough when she came in, suddenly flushed with bright colour. She covered it with her hands, and I saw tears slip through her interlaced fingers.

She was crying, but she made no sound. There was a dead silence. It was broken by Uncle Benjamin. He laughed—sneeringly. I cursed him for it at the moment—and then blessed him. His laughter

drew Sylvia's attention away from whatever emotion it was that was agitating her.

She turned upon Uncle Benjamin like a tigress—he drew back from her, half-startled by the indignant glance which she flashed upon him.

"How dare you!" she cried. "Have you no feeling? Nor you?" She turned upon Mrs. Benjamin, who shifted uneasily in her chair, and affected to toy with the strings of her bonnet. "Don't you see that it—that it is a crime, a sin, against—my mother?"

I heard Uncle Richard swear under his breath. His beard stiffened—I began to fear that he might treat Uncle Benjamin as he had treated Cousin Thomas. But Uncle Benjamin went blundering on—he meant to have his say as some compensation for Thomas's bruises and cuts.

"I've nothing to say against your mother or anybody else's mother," he said surlily, "and what I have to say I'm not afraid of saying here or elsewhere. I'm not going to have my son half-murdered because he happens to mention something that all his relations believe to be true. And you're old enough to know what is believed."

"Be careful, Ben," said Uncle Richard, with a quiet insistence that made me wish Uncle Benjamin would go. "We've had enough."

"*We've* had enough, you mean," sneered Uncle Benjamin. "Me and your sisters. Who is it that's to blame if such-like stuff does get in the papers? Who gave cause for it? Ask that lad there if he hasn't known for years that his Aunt Sophia hasn't always believed that girl to be your——"

I was just in time, Sylvia was just in time to get between Uncle Richard and the table as he made a sudden step forward towards his brother. He shook off my hand as if it had been a feather, and he muttered a very savage oath. Sylvia laid her hand on his chest.

"No, Dick," she said. "It isn't—worth while."

Uncle Richard dropped back again. He laughed.

"You're right, child," he said. "It wouldn't be worth while. Say what you have to say, Ben, and go."

"Aye; but I'm not afraid of you!" retorted Uncle Benjamin. "Let the lad answer my question."

"I should like to know what right you have to question me," I asked hotly. "I shall not answer."

But Sylvia turned a commanding eye upon me.

"Answer him, Gerard!" she said.

I hung my head and fidgeted with the things which lay before me on the table. Sylvia spoke again:

"Gerard!"

"I believe Mrs. Winterbee thinks something of the sort," I said in a low voice.

"Aye, and isn't afraid to say it!" exclaimed Uncle Benjamin with a triumphant sneer. "And your Aunts Frances and Caroline would say it, too, if they weren't two silly old women, frightened to speak. And when a lad that's heard it talked of ever since he was a child happens to mention it, he's set upon like a footpad and knocked about in such a fashion that it'll cost me a pretty penny to pay his medical man's bill!"

"A whole week in bed, the medical man said," murmured Mrs. Benjamin. "Severe shock to the system—that's how he described it."

Uncle Richard sighed deeply—I knew why. The grace of proper repentance was not possible to him. Sylvia turned to me with a question in her eyes.

"What is it, Gerard?" she asked. "You tell me."

"It's this, Sylvia," I answered, resolved to tell her everything. "The information, or suggestion, which inspired that paragraph, came from Thomas Harrington, who had often heard it spoken of by his father and mother. Uncle Richard administered a sound thrashing to Master Thomas, for his share in it, this afternoon, and his father and mother are here to complain of his treatment as being too harsh—which it wasn't, for I was there myself, and saw it——"

"Yes, you were there!" interrupted Uncle Benjamin. "And you'd a stick yourself that you meant to use on him. I'm not sure that I'll not have the law of you as well, you young scoundrel!"

"Don't, Gerard!" said Sylvia, for I, too, had my share of the Harrington temper, and made a move in Uncle Benjamin's direction. "It's no good." She turned to Uncle Benjamin and for a moment looked him up and down. "So you all, Dick's brother and sisters, think that what this paper says is true?" she asked.

"I've told you what we think is true," he replied sullenly.

"It's a lie to say that either Aunt Frances or Aunt Caroline think so!" I exclaimed. "At least, they never said such a thing straight out—they——"

Sylvia interrupted me.

"Do they think it, Gerard?" she asked.

I hung my head for the second time.

"I think they—fear it might be so," I confessed.

"Aye, I should think they did!" said Uncle Benjamin, maliciously triumphant. "We've all thought it, always. And said naught—for the credit of the family. But such things always come out in the end."

"They're bound to come out," murmured Mrs. Benjamin softly. "And innocent people suffer for them."

She meant, I think, to suggest that Cousin Thomas was the innocent victim not merely of his uncle's brutal treatment at the present, but of his duplicity in the past. Uncle Richard smiled; then he yawned.

"If you've said all you want to say, Ben," he remarked, looking bored and weary, "we'll stop all this. Your son got what he deserved, and I'll give him or any man more than that if the offence is repeated. As for what you or anybody else thinks, I don't care that," he wound up, snapping his fingers contemptuously. "I've made my own way very well without any of you, and if none of you have any more belief in me than you've just suggested, I'm sorry for you."

Uncle Benjamin sneered.

"Tall talk—tall talk!" he said. "Very fine talk, I'm sure. And no doubt you'll be able to tell this young lady all about herself, eh, when it comes to fending and proving things. You'll no doubt be able to produce her mother's marriage lines, and her father's death certificate, and such-like little matters. No doubt of it, of course. Everything, of course, is all square and above-board—always has been. But I'll tell you what it is," concluded Uncle Benjamin in a sudden fulmination of all the conflicting motives

that were in him, "I'll tell you what it is—if you think that I paid a heavy premium to a first-class firm like Booker and Hoppers to have my son assaulted in the presence of their workmen, all because he happened to refer to what you aren't man enough to acknowledge—"

Sylvia, gazing alternately from the face of one man to the other, interrupted. She approached Uncle Richard.

"Don't let him say these things," she said. "Show him that he's mistaken, and that it is wicked and cruel to—"

Uncle Benjamin caught her up.

"Aye, let him prove it!" he said. "That's the thing to do. Let's have chapter and verse—that sort of thing isn't done in a corner. If I'd been a young woman," continued Uncle Benjamin, returning to a particularly unctuous manner which he could assume very well at times, "if I, I say, had been a young woman of ability, likely to be brought before the world in a public manner, I'd have taken good care that the only man that did know all about me should make things so that there'd be no chance for people to talk. There's such a thing as being placed in a false position. I'm sure"—Uncle Benjamin made a quick change into the rôle of sympathetic heavy father—"I'm sure I'm sorry for any young woman that finds herself in such a position. It must be a trying position to occupy—not to be able to say who your father was and aught about him, and his relations with your mother; it's a cruel world, this, and there's a lot of talk goes on in it."

Sylvia grasped the hollowness of Uncle Benjamin's moral reflections. She turned again to Uncle

Richard. I, too, was watching him—I could not understand his attitude towards this matter. Why did he not speak and confound his brother once for all? And why did he not recognise the anxiety in Sylvia's face; see the dread, doubt, perplexity, the half-formed suspicion awakening there? He stood, a defiant figure, leaning squarely against the mantelpiece; his arms were folded across his chest, his mouth appeared to be firmly closed beneath his heavy moustache; his eyes, lowering and contemptuous, were fixed on Uncle Benjamin as if he were looking through him. And his features suddenly relaxed into a sardonic grin, and he laughed—laughter that was not pleasant to hear.

"You're a smug scoundrel, Ben!" he said. "And you've more insight into human nature than I thought you had. But you need not wait—nor your wife. I've nothing to tell you."

Sylvia, who had gone nearer to him, drew back—her look of perplexity deepened. Uncle Benjamin, watching her out of the corners of his eyes, smiled.

"And no doubt you have nothing to tell her?" he said, meaningly.

"I have nothing to tell anybody at present," replied Uncle Richard.

"Then I'll tell you something," said Uncle Benjamin. "I'm not going to have my son knocked about by you—especially in the presence of work-folk that he's set over. There'll be questions asked, and have been asked already, and I shall do as I like about answering them. And you've nobody to thank but yourself. If you like to keep a young woman in your house that you can't give any proper account of, and if that young woman chooses to stay there under

those conditions, why, you must take the consequences. And me and my wife'll bid you good evening."

None of us made any reply to this leave-taking. Uncle Richard had possessed himself of the poker, and was stirring the fire in an abstracted fashion. Sylvia, her eyes fixed on the table, was arranging and re-arranging the contents of a box of cigars upon which her hand had fallen. Uncle Benjamin and his wife passed out. The door closed heavily upon them.

CHAPTER XVII.

CHANGES.

IF there were things in the foregoing scene which had puzzled me a little there were things in the scene which followed that puzzled me a good deal more. I was accustomed to the Harrington eccentricities of temperament and character, but although I was half a Harrington myself, I often found it hard to understand exactly, and sometimes could not understand at all, the curious fashion in which one or other of them behaved at what most people would call critical moments. I had found it difficult, for example, to account for Uncle Benjamin's excessive virulence during the episode which had terminated in the withdrawal of himself and his wife. Was he really so devoted to Thomas that the bruising of that precious young gentleman's body roused him to a pitch of exceptional indignation against his brother? Was he sincere in his denunciation of Uncle Richard as the source of a scandal that must needs reflect upon the Harrington good name? Or had he some secret resentment against Uncle Richard, some cherished debt of vengeance to pay off; had he seized upon this incident as a legitimate reason for the unbridling of his tongue? There had been a note of personal animosity, a savour of black blood, about his words and their tone. Why?

Again, I could not make out why Uncle Richard had, as I thought, trifled with the matter. It seemed

to me that he might quite easily have said, "Here, we'll soon settle all this: Sylvia's father was so-and-so—he did this—he lived there—he married her mother at such-and-such a time and at such-and-such a place—he died on such-and-such a date—he was buried in such-and-such a churchyard or cemetery—that's all about him, and if you want documentary evidence you can have it." It seemed to me that he could have repeated this with reference to the case of Sylvia's mother, and so have thrown Uncle Benjamin's charge back in his throat. Why had he not done so—if for no other reason than for Sylvia's sake? As she herself had said, these charges were a wrong to her mother. They were, therefore, an insult of the gravest quality to herself.

It was very quiet in Uncle Richard's dining-room after Uncle Benjamin and his wife had departed. Nobody seemed inclined to speak. Sylvia continued to arrange and re-arrange the cigars in the box and to stare abstractedly at the table; Uncle Richard, still planted on the hearthrug, legs wide apart and hands thrust deep into his trousers pockets, stared through his tangled locks at some indefinite point of the ceiling. Behind him the clock ticked and the fire crackled. Outside the cabs rattled merrily along the street.

It seemed quite a long time before anybody spoke. But at length Uncle Richard addressed the ceiling.

"I suppose there's no row in the world like a family row," he said, in the tone of one uttering a grave philosophical truth. "It licks anything for a sheer brutal return to the primæval."

Sylvia, whom I was watching carefully, darted a

queer, sidelong look at him, which he either did not see or affected not to see. Her lips opened slightly —then closed again in a straight line. But his remark had brought her out of whatever reverie it was that she had fallen into. She suddenly picked up the tray on which the coffee things stood, carried it across the room, placed it on the dumb waiter near the door, and going to the sideboard opened a cellaret and took out a spirit-case. This she placed on the table. Another journey sideboard-wards and back flanked the spirit-case on one side with soda-water and tumblers ; another, made through the curtains which shut off the studio, produced Uncle Richard's favourite pipe and a certain tobacco-jar respecting which he cherished a superstition. This done she went over to a table whereon various feminine matters, such as work-baskets and sewing materials, were arranged, and selecting some garment or other, sat down in an easy-chair and began to stitch as calmly and quietly as if she were an old experienced matron to whom sewing-time had come round. We were as quiet again as ever—save for the ticking of the clock and the jolly crackling of the fire.

At last Uncle Richard brought his eyes downwards from the ceiling. Lowering his gaze gradually in a straight line, it fell at last upon the decanters and glasses. He moved slowly to the table ; his left hand closed around a glass, his right around a decanter. He poured out whisky ; he mixed soda-water with it ; he took a hearty pull, and said “ Hah ! ” very sharply. Then he took up his pipe with palpable affection and filled it. In the midst of great clouds of smoke he subsided into an easy chair opposite Sylvia, and became a man of peace.

"I had a bit of luck myself, book-hunting, yesterday, boy," he said, addressing me on the very subject which we had been discussing before Mr. and Mrs. Benjamin walked in upon us. "I picked up a nice copy of Waagen's 'Art and Artists in England'—oddly enough, I'd never read it before. Now, in his second volume, writing about the Royal Academy exhibition of 1836, he makes some amusing remarks about two of Turner's pictures—the burning of the old Houses of Parliament, and the Ehrenbreitstein. He says——"

He went on to quote Waagen's opinion; he criticised it; he placed it in various lights; he talked without stopping for a full hour. All that time Sylvia sewed steadily, giving no sign that she was listening.

Upon any other occasion I could have heard Uncle Richard preach Art—or, rather, his own conception of his own particular branch of it—until midnight; on this he began to get on my nerves. So did Sylvia, with her sewing and her silence. I took advantage of the first break—brought about by Uncle Richard's arising to help himself to another drink and to more tobacco—to escape. He pressed me to stop—offered me a bed. I protested that I had work to do, even at that time. To all outward appearance he and Sylvia were their ordinary, normal, perfectly-contented selves when I left them. I went home, wondering a good deal about the events of the day.

I was hard at work next morning—having begun the writing of a new novel on the strength of the first one's success—when Sylvia walked into my rooms, and without preface or parley plunged into the

subject which for my work's sake I was trying very hard to keep out of my thoughts.

"Everything was very queer last night, wasn't it, Jerry?" she said, regarding me inquiringly across my writing-table, at the opposite side of which she had taken a seat.

"Very queer indeed, Sylvia," I replied.

"What struck you as—queerest?" she asked.

"That's a big question," I said. "I never know who is queerest—you or Uncle Richard."

"A couple of strange mortals, you think?"

"I'm sure of it."

"Yet—you're half a Harrington yourself."

"Only half."

"Say the rest—say 'thank goodness.' It was on the tip of your tongue."

"Perhaps it was. Anyhow, you've said it for me."

She smiled at some memory.

"Do you know why I minded my seam, as our grandmothers would have said, so zealously, for a whole hour by the clock, last night?" she asked.

"I've given up trying to understand anything that women do," I replied.

"You mean that you haven't even begun to try to understand," she retorted. "Well—I was in a furious temper."

"I don't think I'm very much surprised. With Cousin Thomas, no doubt?"

"Oh!" she said, laughing. "I don't think I even thought of Cousin Thomas—he isn't worth a thought. I was angry with myself."

"Yourself?"

"Much more than with anyone else. I lost my head. Someone was kind enough to send me a copy

of that paper thing to the theatre, with the passage marked. I read it, and was fool enough to be upset by it—so much so that I couldn't do anything, and had to get Mr. Courtney to let me run away home. I'll never, never offend in that fashion again; it was cowardly—I could kill myself for it! Then I let myself be upset still further by thinking of the injustice of it all; and the sight of those two people, whose intelligence is about equal to that of cattle, infuriated me. You see, I have always been taught the sinfulness of interference."

"It *is* one of Uncle Richard's pet theories," I remarked.

"One of the cardinal points of his religion, you mean," she said with something of child-like earnestness. "They represented to me, those two, the incarnation of evil thought and evil speech. Supposing that the thing they said was true, what right had they to sit in judgment on—my mother?"

"Yes," I said.

"Then I was angry with Dick. He has been teaching me things for years, but I am afraid I am still unregenerate in a great many ways—still human, still——"

"For God's sake, Sylvia, don't try to reach some inhuman stage!" I entreated her.

"Perhaps 'human' was the wrong word to use," she said. "I meant that I am still susceptible to certain little things which one ought not to care a two-penny damn for. This was a little thing."

"Oh!" I exclaimed. "It struck me as being a pretty big one."

"No. Because I, having known Dick ever since I knew anything, knew quite well that when he said

'No' to these charges he was speaking the truth. Therefore," she wound up, with an emphatic tap of her fingers upon the table, "I ought to have paid no more attention to this thing than one does to the bite of a gnat."

"That's a poor simile," I said. "I've suffered tortures from the bite of a gnat."

"Then you're very thin-skinned," she said. "But that is why I turned to such a nerve-soothing occupation as plain sewing, and kept silence—either from bad or good words. At the end of an hour I was placid, wasn't I?"

"Just as placid as you are—queer," I replied. "Which means—perfectly."

Then we stared hard at each other and laughed.

"I suppose you and Uncle Richard never spoke of this again last night?" I said presently.

"Quite right. We didn't. You see," she continued, "I—I felt rather ashamed of myself. Because by the mere fact of my having asked Dick in the presence of those people if their wicked charge was true I suggested, didn't I, that it had been in my mind, if only for a second, that it might be? And that was doubting him—and wicked on my part."

I sat watching her for some time before I spoke again.

"You have a big sense of loyalty, Sylvia," I said at last. "You rest anything or everything that you know of your father and mother on Uncle Richard, don't you? You believe that if need were he could just crush all these people with—shall we say irrefutable evidence?"

"I'm sure of it."

"Then—why doesn't he?"

She shook her head and shrugged her shoulders as if the question were one of no importance.

"For your own sake, for instance?" I suggested.

She shrugged her shoulders again.

"Then for—your mother's sake. If we are not to speak evil of the dead we are also bound not to allow evil to be spoken of them without protest."

She looked very grave at that, and seemed to think a good deal. But presently her face cleared and she smiled.

"I believe in Dick," she said. "He's been everything to me all my life. I know he's queer, and he has some mad ways, and some very bad ways, and he's like a fractious, unmanageable child at times—you don't know what I have to do with him if he takes certain fits into his head. But he is a man with some spice of variety in him, and when you get at the real him, he's what the Yankees call a white man. And that reminds me, Jerry, that I came to tell you that I'm going to the States."

This announcement occasioned no feeling of surprise in me, and I said so, asking Sylvia at the same time if Uncle Richard knew of her decision. She replied that she had told him of it that morning.

"And I dare venture to say that he doesn't like the idea," said I. "Am I right?"

"He is very kind about it," she answered. "He doesn't like it, I know, but Mr. Courtney has pointed out to both of us what a chance it is for me; and after all I shall only be away for a few months, and if the play is a success and I do well in it Mr. Scharff has promised to bring it over to England. But never mind that—I wanted to ask you, Jerry, if you will look after Dick while I am away. You will?"

"As much as I can—but I can't make up for you, you know," I answered. "When are you going?"

"Very soon," she replied. "Quite soon—a few days before Christmas. You see, the Courtneys are going over for a month or two—she is American, you know—and it is a good chance. I shall go with them—they will be very helpful."

"What will you bet, Sylvia," I said, laughing, "that at the last moment Uncle Richard does not take it into his head to go with you?"

"No," she said with decision. "He won't. It would be like him, wouldn't it? But he won't."

"How do you know?"

"Because he has promised me that he won't," she answered. "You see, he offered to go with me—said that he must, because I should have no one to take care of me. And, Jerry, I didn't want that—I wanted to feel that I had just got to take care of myself, to be entirely responsible for myself. I wonder if you understand what I mean?"

"Yes, I think I do understand that, at any rate," I replied.

"It will be a valuable experience," she said meditatively. "So far Dick has done everything for me—now it's time I did things for myself. And so—" She concluded with a gesture expressive of emancipation.

"All right—but don't come back with an American husband," I said.

"I think I can safely swear that I will not," she answered. "Even if I should be tempted by millionaires. But I shall have no time to think of anything but my work—I mean to make that part a big, real big, success!"

I sighed deeply. She asked me why I sighed.

"Sheer envy!" said I. "You will leap into fame—and fortune—at a bound, and I shall go on scribbling until—"

"Don't be a donkey," she interrupted. "So *you* want to, or would like to, leap to fame and fortune straight off, eh? Jerry—you're thinking of Andalusia."

I did not trouble myself to deny it.

"Where is she?" inquired Sylvia.

"At Wintersleave—with her father," I answered.
"Never mind that, Sylvia."

She nodded—an understanding sort of nod—and reverted to the subject of Uncle Richard. Would I faithfully promise to see him as much as possible, to sit with him, to talk to him, and, if I saw signs which seemed to indicate that he was bothered or worried, to distract his attention by what suggested itself to me as a happy means?

"All to the best of my ability," I protested.

"Of late," she said, "he has had none of those letters from abroad which used to worry him—I know they did. If any should come——"

"How shall I know if any come?" I asked.
"That's scarcely likely."

"Oh, you will know!" she said confidently. "He will be grumpy, and he will paint furiously, and smoke all day long, and have a bad temper, and at last suddenly become quite angelic and nice—which will mean that it's all passed off."

"But while it's on?" I asked.

"You must amuse and interest him—if you can," she replied. "Take him to see anything new—even if it's only a dog-fight."

Then Sylvia went away, with the remark that she would be up to her eyes in work during the next ten days, and I resumed my labours, wondering if Uncle Richard would be able to stay peaceably in England during her absence; for I had seen enough already of their home life to know that he was as dependent upon Sylvia in some things as she had once been upon him for everything.

I saw nothing of either of them until the evening before Sylvia's departure, when Uncle Richard gave a dinner-party in her honour to a small gathering of very particular friends. He was in high spirits that night and behaved as if the occasion were one of unalloyed joy. He kept up this brave show until Sylvia and Mr. and Mrs. Courtney had steamed out of Euston next day; but when the train had completely disappeared and it was useless to wave our hands any longer, I saw his face cloud over, and knew that he was thinking of the empty house to which he must go back. That I was right in this surmise I was soon to discover; never was man so restless or whimsical as he that day—he could neither rest nor work, but had me from one place to another, until I realised that to act as Uncle Richard's companion was going to be no easy task. We went to his club from the station; there, at lunch, he heard of some big football match at Richmond, and would have me go with him to see it; thence we went back to the club, where a desire to play billiards seized upon him and kept him busy until dinner time, when he declared that the club dinners were never fit to eat, and dragged me off to dine at the Criterion. We looked in at more than one theatre after that, and it was very late when we returned to Keppel Street—so late,

indeed, that I stayed there for the night. I believe Uncle Richard sat up a long time after I had gone to bed ; it was nearly noon when he appeared next day, and he looked rather gloomier than was usual even in his gloomy moods.

He reminded me that morning as we breakfasted that it was now within a few days of Christmas, and that whoever wanted to buy Christmas presents must make haste. He proposed that we should spend the afternoon in going round the shops—it was his custom, as I knew, to send all his friends and relations something to remind them of him at the festive season. It seemed to me that we did nothing but wander about shops all the rest of that day, and that Uncle Richard had a remarkably extensive collection of children amongst his friends. He bought something for every member of his own family, even for Uncle Benjamin, to whom he despatched a box of fine Havana cigars, and for Cousin Thomas, who was destined to receive a handsome scarf-pin. That night, again, he would not dine at home, and it was very late when we got back there. And there, having been in waiting for him for many hours, was a telegram from Aunt Frances saying that her mother was dying, and begging him to go to Highcroft at once and to take me with him.

It was then close upon midnight, and there was no train until a quarter past five in the morning. It was useless to go to bed—we spent the time in making ready for our journey. When at last we set off for the station through a softly-falling snow I realised, with a rare leap of the heart, that whatever else might happen, this journey would take me once more to Andalusia.

CHAPTER XVIII.

DEATH-SHADOWS.

WE reached Sicaster at nine o'clock that morning, and walking up to the Golden Swan in the Market-place snatched a hurried breakfast while a trap was prepared for our journey to Wintersleave. The Golden Swan people knew us, and were able to give us news of my grandmother, for my Aunt Caroline and her husband had been travelling all night, and had hired a trap only two hours before, which had just then returned, and the driver had brought word back that old Mrs. Harrington was still alive, but sinking fast. There was something in the nod of the head with which Uncle Richard received this news that made me think that he felt certain of seeing his mother alive. More than once in the train he had said, as if following out some train of thought of his own, "The Harringtons always die hard—women and men," and had hinted that my grandmother would never pass until she had seen all her living children.

We drove out of Sicaster, past Uncle Benjamin's fine house, which overlooked the road to Wintersleave. Cousin Thomas, home for the Christmas holidays, was just coming out of the gates in company with his friend Mr. Letherby. They were attired in the latest London fashion, and were so much engrossed by their grandeur—which they were doubt-

less on their way to exhibit round the Market-place and in the various bar-parlours of the inns—that they did not see us. It was a perfect winter's morning: the land was covered with a fine, light snow, which sparkled and coruscated in the rays of a sun shining out of a cloudless sky. There was a sharp, keen frost—the little stream that ran all along the roadside to Wintersleave was well coated with ice, and on the village pond at Marlton, half-way between Sicaster and Wintersleave, people were skating and children sliding. Everything was very quiet and peaceful, and it seemed strange to think that only a few hours before we had been in the glare and confusion of London. There was my old mentor, the windmill, standing gaunt and commanding against the winter morning sky—the sails were turning slowly in the light breeze. In one of the fields on the hillside a shepherd was busy amongst his sheep—it made me think of the days when I, too, had worked on the land. Uncle Richard turned and saw what I was looking at, and he laughed.

"I don't think either of us would mind taking a hand at chopping turnips, lad, eh?" he said. "It's a fine rest for town-tired brains. There's the old church tower."

But I had seen the old tower already rising high and clear above the elms and chestnuts in the Vicarage park. It brought back many memories, and called up many visions of years which seemed far off already, though they were in reality so very near. Of all the things in Wintersleave, nothing ever appealed to me or influenced me so much as that ancient landmark, the centre point of the village. Seen before anything else, even before the turrets and

gables of the Manor House, it seemed to beckon a perpetual welcome, and to—

A heavy, dull, clanging sound came through frost-sharpened air—dong—dong—dong—dong—dong—the tolling of a bell at steady, second-long intervals. We looked at each other instinctively.

“Lad, that’s the passing bell!” said Uncle Richard.

“Yes,” I answered.

The man who was driving us heard the passing bell too, and whipped up his horse a little. Its iron-shod feet clattered and rang on the frost-bound road—the steady dong—dong—dong of the bell boomed beyond their lighter note.

We came to the first house in the village—Brewster, the carpenter’s. Brewster himself was hanging over his gate. It was a favourite occupation of his, winter and summer—he might have been there, without moving, ever since I had last seen him, some months before, for I had then left him there, chewing a straw, and he was chewing a straw now.

“Brewster will know,” said Uncle Richard, and bade the driver stop.

Brewster came forward scratching his bare elbows. He greeted us with a friendly grin.

“Is my mother dead, Brewster?” asked Uncle Richard without ceremony.

Brewster shook his head, and then nodded it side-wise at the church tower.

“No, sir—t’owd missis is alive,” he said. “Yon’s for your mother’s owd man—owd Wraby. Died at five o’clock this morning. Ye’ll hear t’man-strokes in a minute.”

The passing bell became silent. A brief pause—



"THE SEXTON WAS COMING OUT OF THE NORMAN PORCH
AS WE PASSED THE CHURCH."

(p. 289.)

then nine long slower strokes. A man. "Three for a child—six for a woman—nine for a man." Poor old Wraby!

"Mi mother laid him out," said Brewster, always inclined to gossip. "An' she wor with him at his latter end. Said 'at he talked a deal about t'owd missis and them gooseberry bushes 'at he wor allus wantin' to rive up. Howsomeiver, he's hed to depart for t'other side o' Jordan, as they say, wi'out gettin' what he wanted."

The sexton was coming out of the Norman porch as we passed the church. I wondered how soon he would have to go back, climb the old stone steps to the belfry, and once more announce to the parish that another soul had passed. This time it would be six strokes—a woman. "Three for a child—six for a woman—nine for a man"—the old precept rang in my head as insistently as the dong-dong-dong of the passing bell.

The old farmhouse looked just as it had always looked at Christmas ever since I had known it. The Christmas decorations were all in place—they had been completed, Aunt Frances said, before my grandmother's sudden seizure; she had been asking about them only the previous week, and saying they must not be forgotten. Every room in the house was a bower of green, brightened still further by the scarlet of the holly berries and the white of the Christmas roses. In the great kitchen hung a mistletoe bough—the maids and the men, I knew, had been busied on that since St. Thomas's day, and were doubtless waiting impatiently until the dawn of Christmas should give them the right to kiss each other under it. Some favoured youngster would be admitted

across the threshold on Christmas morning "to let Christmas in," and would stand between the mistletoe bough and the Christmas fire and bawl the Christmas "nominy" at the top of his voice. Would the old mistress hear it, however many doors they left open? She was alive when we got there, but—

We found all the members of the Harrington family at Highcroft Farm. Mr. and Mrs. Winterbee had arrived the previous evening; Aunt Caroline and her husband that morning; Uncle Benjamin had been in the house all night. He and Uncle Richard met as if the recent outbreak had never happened—each was as cool and unconcerned as if they were either the veriest strangers or had parted yesterday on the best of terms. For the thousandth time I said to myself that the Harringtons were a queer lot, hard to understand.

I have often thought of that day since—thought of it as one thinks of some scene in a play of which one has forgotten everything but that one scene. Upstairs, in the big sleeping-chamber which was known as "the best room," the old mistress lay silent—sleeping or unconscious, I could not tell, when it came to my turn to see her. Her daughters were in the room with her—did not leave her. Downstairs, in parlour and kitchen, everybody talked in low tones—there was a hush of expectancy, such as you feel in the auditorium when the culminating point is about to be reached on the stage. And yet, the subjects of discussion were the commonplace subjects of everyday life. As if there had never been a difference between them, Uncle Benjamin and Uncle Richard, over pipes and glasses in the little parlour, were discussing the present state of agriculture, the elder

brother listening with interest to the younger as he retailed the results of his latest reading on the changing conditions which were coming over English farming (it was one of Uncle Richard's chief pleasures to read everything that he could lay hands on relating to the industry which his fathers had followed for centuries), and proving himself amenable to good argument when he heard it. In the big parlour, Mr. Moseley, Mr. Winterbee, and the minister from Sicaster were discussing some matter of interest to the denomination to which they and all the Harringtons—except Uncle Richard—belonged. In little parlour and big parlour they all talked quietly in low voices. In the kitchens there was the same quietude, although there were many things to do, incident upon the season. The maid-servants moved about on tip-toe—small need, for the ancient walls were three feet thick!—the men came in to their noon-day dinner, talked in whispers, and stole out again without their usual jokes with the girls. There was a constant succession of callers at the door which opened into the paddock—men, women, and children came along the path as if they were afraid to disturb the silence which hung over the house, made their whispered inquiries and got their whispered answer, and went softly away. It was as if the Angel of the Grey Wings hung in visible shape above our red roof, a symbol of infinite peace against the finite sky.

It impressed me greatly that I fell into my old place in the economy of things. I was a young man now; I had seen something, I had done something in the outside world, and had justified, in at least a modest way, something of my own pretensions. But

to all these home-people I was still the boy whom they had known since he was a child. There was not a man-servant or woman-servant on the place who had not been in my grandmother's employment for many years; in spite of the fact that I was now grown up and my own master, they still cherished their original conception of me, tempered with wonder that I wore a tailed coat and had a man's voice and—marvellous thing to them!—lived in far-off London.

It was the custom in old-fashioned houses like that to call in extra help at great times, such as births, deaths, marriages, and village feasts. The extra help in our case was always sought from old Mary Simpson, widow of a former shepherd, dead before I was born. I knew I should find her there: there she was, looking scarcely a day older than she had looked twenty years before. Moving restlessly about the house—for I was not interested in anything that the older men were talking about—I came across Mary Simpson in the larder, where she was engaged in chopping up the various ingredients for the New Year's stock of mince-pies—the Christmas mince-pies had been made a fortnight before, and I had already eaten several of them—and because I had formerly made myself an adept in that art, I provided myself with a chopper and worked alongside her at the big stone table until dinner was laid for the family in the big parlour.

"And to see you there, Master Jerry, wi' that theer white apron over your fine London clothes—and a precious mucky sight you'd ha' made on 'em if I hadn't thrapsed you down to putting it on, for them apples and raisins and currants and lemon peels is

messy things—to see you there, I say, a fine young gentleman!—well, deary me, it's a world, is this, 'at's got neyther top nor bottom to it, isn't it, now?" said Mary Simpson. "It reminds me o' summat 'at th' preycher said in' t' chappil t'other Sunday—he wor preychin' thro' t' text, 'Man is fearfully and wonderfully made,' and he wor a bit of a novice, ye mun understand, Master Jerry, love—he hadn't no experience—an' he hummed and hawed a deal afore he got a start, and then he said—after he'd repeated t' text a score or so o' times, 'Aye, my friends,' he says, 'man is fearfully and wonderfully made—both before and behind.' An' I've been thinkin' since I come here last night—they sent for me, you know, Master Jerry, as soon as the poor owd missis were ta'en bad, as, of course, they would—I've been thinking, I say, 'at this here world is like what that theer young preycher said—it's fearful and wonderful, both before and behind, and on all t' sides 'at it's gotten—and it's gotten more sides nor one can think on—mark you that theer, Master Jerry."

"I believe every word you say, Mary," said I.

"Ye'd be a poor sort if ye didn't," said Mary. "Now, theer's this here fam'ly of th' owd missis's—eh, dear, they are a queer lot! Ye mu'nt say nowt at all—ye see, ye aren't quite one on 'em—nobbut half-and-half—so I can talk. Now, theer's Master Benjamin—eh, dear—he's one o' t' blackest-tempered men 'at ivver I cam' across—as ye know, Master Jerry. And yit—now, I'll tell you summat, just to show how fearful and wonderful things is. He's that short in his speech, is Master Benjamin, wi' poor folk 'at ye'd think he thowt they wor muck aneath his feet. But theer's two or three owd people i' this

village, Master Jerry, 'at 'ud ha' gone to t' workus if it hadn't been for Benjamin—they wo'd!"

This was a new side of Uncle Benjamin's character, truly, and yet I was not surprised to hear it, for the Harringtons were quite unaccountable in many ways.

"He kep' owd Sarah Harrison an' her husband for years, did Master Benjamin," continued Mary Simpson. "Aye, a did! A queer, queer fam'ly. Theer wor John, now—him 'at went away. Theer's nivver nowt said about Master John—it wor sort of understood 'at he cam' to a poorish end i' foreign parts."

"He died in Canada, Mary," said I.

"So it wor said," remarked Mary with an air of deep wisdom. "But theer is folk, Master Jerry, 'at believes 'at John's no more dead nor what I am, for theer wor a Wintersleave man 'at allus stuck to it 'at he'd see'd him alive, i' th' flesh, a year or two after he wor given out to be dead and buried. That wor t' last schoolmaister—he went to London town once for a holiday, and he said 'at he'd seen John. And, of course, all t' family said 'at that wor impossible. But t' schoolmaister, he allus stood by it. 'I've as good ees as onny man,' he used to say on t' quiet, like, 'and I'm none goin' to doubt 'em at this time—I see'd him as live as what I am.' That's what he said, did t' late schoolmaister."

They summoned me to dinner just then, so I heard no more of Mary Simpson's garrulous tongue. It was much more entertaining to listen to her, however, than to join the family dinner, which, under the circumstances, was dull and depressing. My aunts showed traces of tears, and while they were at table

no one talked much. I was glad to get away from the big parlour again ; and after a time, finding that I could do nothing to help, and that there was no immediate prospect of any change in my grandmother's condition, I went out for a walk into the village, cherishing a fervent hope that I might encounter Andalusia.

Everybody in the village seemed to be at the cottage doors. In a rustic community the death of a well-known inhabitant is an event of a much more exciting nature than the death of a sovereign would be in London. And here was old Wraby gone already, while the day was very young, and there was the prospect of his mistress following him ere the day was over. I heard more than one of the little groups of women discussing the question of whether or not mistress and servant would be buried on one day.

I called at old Wraby's cottage to condole with his daughter. The little house-place was bright as a new pin ; a wood fire crackled gaily on the hearth ; at the table drawn up by it the daughter and a couple of neighbours were taking a cup of early tea. That death-day tea is a comfortable institution, although it is celebrated with groans, sighs, and lamentations spoken quietly and with ready acquiescence in the decrees of Providence. There was the usual wafer-like bread-and-butter, the freshly made tea-cakes, the thick cream—all *de rigueur* on these occasions ; there, too, flanking the tea-pot, was the small brown jug containing the little matter of something comforting—rum, for choice—without which no cup of tea taken under such circumstances would be considered perfect.

“ She'll none be long,” asserted Wraby's daughter,

after receiving my condolences and inquiring herself after my grandmother. "Her an' mi poor father had been companions i' the vale o' tears for nigh on to sixty year; and if she'd to know 'at he'd been ferried over to t' other side o' Jordan's banks, as they say, she'd never rest, wodn't t' owd missis, till she catched up wi' him. Howsumiver, he'll wait on t' banks for her. I can see him now in white robes and a pair o' wings like a peacock's tail, though I'm sure he looks nice enough i' his grave-clothes—I see'd to them missen, and theer's no better hand nor what I am i' t' washin' an' ironin' way."

I went upstairs, following the usual custom, to look at the old man who had served the family so long and faithfully: he reminded me of a giant oak which falls at last through ripe old age.

"He bothered hissen about rivin' up them gooseberry bushes till t' varry last end," whispered the daughter as she smoothed away a wrinkle in the old man's sheet. "He'd wanted to mak' 'sparrer-grass beds theer for thirty year. However, he'll ha' summat else to do now at he's gotten to t' good place—they'll noän grow gooseberrys, nor yit 'sparrer-grass theer, I reckon."

Outside the cottage I came face to face with Andalusia. She was on her way to visit old Wraby's daughter. I walked up and down the road while she paid her call. And, as if by mutual consent, when she came out of the cottage, which was on the edge of the village, we turned away along the frost-bound highroad under a blood-red sun, which was rapidly dropping to the western horizon beyond the belts and lines of fir and pine.

We did not talk much during that walk, but it

seemed to me that in some subtle fashion we understood a great many things. She told me of her pursuits and occupations since she had come to Winter-sleave; her father, who in his old age had developed a taste for speculation, which followed a previous passion for gambling, had made a most unfortunate transaction before leaving London, and was practically dependent upon his daughter's small fortune, which, by good luck, was strictly secured to her. And Andalusia looked anxious and troubled, and asked my advice about several things, and seemed to rely on me and to think me possessed of sufficient wisdom and sense to tell her what to do, and I felt very proud and happy to be trusted by her. We talked very seriously indeed that afternoon, and she told me that she had made up her mind that after the death of her father, who was now a very old man and showing signs of decay, she intended to adopt nursing as a profession, and to give up her life to it. Yet even then I went back to the farm full of hope. The future was wide.

The old doctor from Sicaster, who had attended my grandmother for half her life and his, was coming away from the house as I reached it. Mrs. Winter-bee and Aunt Caroline were with him; they looked somewhat relieved, and the old gentleman was chuckling.

"Wonderful recuperative powers, my dear ladies!" he was saying, as I came up to them. "Wonderful, indeed! I thought it was all over yesterday—twice I thought it was all over. This afternoon, you see, quite a recovery. A marvellous woman! But she always was, you know—she always was. Nevertheless, there may be another relapse."

So for the time being my grandmother was out of danger. I learned presently that, after lying at death's very door for the greater part of the previous thirty-six hours, she had suddenly rallied during the doctor's visit, and had not only entered into conversation with him and her daughters, but had asked for some particular form of nourishment to which, she declared, she had taken a fancy. Later on in the evening she was reported to be still stronger. And about eight o'clock that night, Mrs. Winterbee and Aunt Caroline being with her, she suddenly announced her determination to see the whole of her family, so that she might say a word or two to each.

There was a hurried consultation amongst my aunts on this point; then another between them and their brothers downstairs. Uncle Benjamin and Aunt Sophia were afraid that the presence of so many people would be harmful; Aunt Frances, who had more experience of her mother than they, said that she would not rest unless her wishes were complied with. And in the end there was a general procession upstairs to the big chamber in which my grandmother lay. I, as youngest, bringing up the rear, and hanging back somewhat unwillingly.

It was a strange scene on which I entered. The room was one of those great, rambling places which are only found in old houses, and most usually in old farmhouses—irregular in shape, with recesses and deep window-places in which the shadows always lie, whether by day or night. Its ceiling was so low that I could touch it. Uncle Benjamin had to stoop as he entered the door. Everything about the best chamber, as it was called, was old and quaint, and

more suggestive of the eighteenth than of the nineteenth century—the furniture was dark and heavy, and the glancing flames of the fire were reflected all over the room on highly polished panels. In the very middle of the room stood the bed—a great four-poster hung with tapestry, whereon was figured scenes from the life of Moses. I had often wondered as a boy if my grandmother, who spent much time in bed, did not get tired of staring at the canopy over her: it depicted the scene wherein Moses is taken from the bulrushes, and was originally conceived and strikingly rendered.

In this great bed my grandmother lay propped up with pillows—the crag-like strength of her face sharpened and accentuated by her weakness and her pallor. Her hands lay outside the counterpane—they might have been carved out of marble. Indeed, there was no colour about her but in her eyes, and they were bright enough as she turned them this way and that, searching the faces bent over her. But it was soon plain that, in spite of their brightness, she was not able to distinguish anything very plainly.

“Is Sophia there, Fanny?” she asked, turning to Aunt Frances, who, by reason of long and patient attendance on her, was leaning over the bed in the nearest position.

“Yes, mother, and Caroline, too,” answered Aunt Frances, bending nearer to her. “And here are Benjamin and Richard, and Mary’s son, Gerard, and William Winterbee, who married Sophia, and Robert Moseley, who married Caroline, you know—all come to see how you are.”

The long white fingers plucked feebly at the sheet.

"I'm feeling rather nicely to-night," said the very old voice. "You must all come and see me again in the morning. But where's my son John—you didn't say John's name, Fanny. Benjamin and Richard, you said, but not John. Richard always promised me faithfully that he'd take great care of John."

There was a dead silence. The three daughters looked at each other. Uncle Benjamin, who was shading his eyes at the foot of the bed, turned his head away. Mr. Winterbee, who stood at my side, whispered to me in a very low voice that my grandmother's mind was wandering, and that the man had been dead for many a year. But in the midst of the silence the old mistress spoke again.

"You've taken care of John, Richard?" she asked. "I knew you would do what you could for him."

Then Uncle Richard, who had been standing near the bed, his hands thrust deep in his pockets, his beard crushed upon his chest, watching his mother earnestly with bent head and moody brow, suddenly started into activity. He drew his sister Frances back from the bed, and, taking her place, bent down to his mother's side.

"I've kept my promise faithfully about John, mother," he said. "Make your mind quite comfortable."

She nodded her head at that in a satisfied fashion, and with an air of assurance which seemed to show that she had not doubted that her son Richard would keep his word. And suddenly remarking that she thought she could go to sleep, she dismissed us all with a solemn blessing, and we went downstairs again. In the little parlour Mr. Winterbee gave it as his opinion that my grandmother's mind was not

clear, and remarked that it was not to be expected that it could be. No one made any reply to this. But I, knowing Uncle Richard fairly well by this time, had a strange feeling that he had spoken very solemnly when he answered that question of his mother's, and I noticed, too, that he said, "I have kept," and not "I kept."

CHAPTER XIX.

FALLING IN PIECES.

IT seemed to be the general opinion amongst the members of her family that my grandmother was out of immediate danger, and would possibly have a good night and be stronger in the morning, and Uncle Benjamin declared his intention of ordering his trap and returning home to Sicaster. But as he was about to say good-night to us the door of the parlour opened and my Aunt Frances, who had remained with her mother when the rest of us came downstairs, entered the room in her usual quiet fashion. She was very white, and I saw her hands tremble as she felt her way to the nearest chair and gripped it. Her sisters were at her side in an instant ; she shook her head as if they could do nothing for her.

“ My mother’s dead ! ” she said in a strange, half-frightened voice. “ She asked for a drink of water soon after you had all gone down, and I turned away to the little table at the bedside to pour some out into a glass. And when I was going to turn round again, I—I couldn’t. Something held me—there. I tried hard, Sophia—but I was held. Just like hands on your arms—holding you tightly—I felt the pressure distinctly. And then it relaxed gently, and I turned to the bed again—and she was gone. You see, I—I wasn’t meant to see her pass.”

And then Aunt Frances broke down. It was always her belief to the end that she was merely

prevented from witnessing the actual passage of her mother's soul, and most of the people who heard of the occurrence shared in her belief.

There was much hurrying to and fro in the old farmhouse that night, and the news spread through the village quickly. It was deputed to me to fetch the old woman, Mrs. Brewster, to perform the laying-out of the body and to give formal notice to the sexton of the death. It was then eight o'clock of the evening, and the sexton decided that he would ring the passing-bell that night. I went with him to the church, for there was nothing more that I could do at the house, and it was depressing to sit there and feel that one could only wait and watch. We passed the layer-out on our way—a hurrying figure in black garments, seen dimly against the snow-clad roads in the light of the sexton's lanthorn and of the glittering stars. I thought of her performing her office—for the second time in one day—and wondered why death in England is always associated with black and sombre things.

"She's laid out a tidyish few in her time, has owd Mally," commented the sexton. "Been at it ever since she wor a youngish woman—I should ha' thowt 'at she'd gotten tired on it, but habits is not easy to break off. An' I lay 'at I've rung for as many as she's straiked."

It was very cold and dark within the old church, and its silence was, indeed, as of the grave. The light of the lanthorn gleamed here and there on the old Norman arches, the ancient monuments, the Royal arms over the gallery, on the stone effigies of the old cross-legged knights in chain armour which lay in nooks and corners. We climbed ricketty

stairs to the belfry in the tower—the scent of age, of death making the atmosphere heavy around us. From the raftered roof of the belfry descended the bell-ropes; the sexton put down his lanthorn on the floor, took one rope in his hand and put his foot in the loop.

"This is the second to-day," he said. "I knew t' owd mistress wouldn't be long after t' owd servant. Things like this allus happens. One goes—t'other follows."

He pulled steadily at the rope, throwing all the weight of his old body upon it with hand and foot. A creaking sound began somewhere far up in the tower—the first stroke of the bell went shivering heavily into the winter night.

There was a shuttered window in the wall of the belfry; I threw it open, and looked out on the church-yard and the village. Thus seen, under the light of stars made brighter by the keen frost, the farmsteads and cottages with their stackyards and orchards, and the woods and coppices which closed them in, looked curiously unfamiliar. Yet what a picture they made, those gaunt trees, those high gables, clothed in silvery snow and outlined against the dark blue of the sky! And the twinkling lights in the windows of farmstead and cottage—how they spoke of the warm hearths within! And high above them the slow, steady clangour of the bell, throwing its message alike to earth and heaven.

"Three for a child—six for a woman—nine for a man."

I lingered with the sexton at his cottage door for some little time after we left the church. I knew what they would be doing in the old farmhouse, for

they were the sort of folk not to let old customs fall into disuse. The window of the death-chamber would be thrown open to the night ; the fire extinguished on the hearth ; the mirrors turned to the wall.

"There'll be a many changes now at Highcroft Farm," said the old man as I said good-night to him. "A many changes! While th' old missis were alive things were sort of bound together, like, and could hold up. But they'll fall i' pieces now, young master —they'll fall i' pieces. It's nowt but change and decay i' this world—I owt to know—I seen a deal on't."

That seemed to be the opinion of most people. I met a goodly proportion of our neighbours, high and low, during the next day or two, and all appeared to be impressed with the certainty of change at Highcroft Farm. It was as if the old mistress's death resembled the sudden destruction of the sound basis of some great structure.

Nobody harped more upon this subject than Mr. Winterbee. During the four days which intervened between my grandmother's death and her burial in the family vault he had much spare time on his hands ; and being a man of no hobby or amusement, he found it hang heavily. He could not for ever wander about the farm estimating the value of the stock nor pay visits to the farmers of the place whom he knew, for they were busy men and generally out and about their land. Uncle Richard would not talk to him about family affairs, and Mr. Winterbee was therefore glad, when he got the opportunity, to pour out his thoughts to me. I was not particularly interested in his conversation, but I learnt a good deal that I had never known.

Mr. Winterbee began with the remark which I had heard a hundred times.

"Make a deal of difference to everything, your grandmother's death, you know, Gerard—a deal of difference," he said.

"I suppose so," I answered. "I've heard it said so by nearly every man, woman, and child in the village since she died, at any rate."

"Dear me!" said Mr. Winterbee. "You've heard it said so, have you, Gerard. Dear me! You've heard it said so. Now, who might you have heard make remarks like that?"

"I've just said—nearly every man, woman, and child in the place!" I replied.

"Dear me! Talking, are they? Aye, to be sure. And think it will make a deal of difference?" said Mr. Winterbee. "Aye, of course. They didn't say anything about your Uncle Benjamin, I expect?"

"No," I answered, "they didn't. They said no more than that the old missis's death would make a deal of difference—which is what you also said."

Mr. Winterbee shot out his cuffs, twitched his eyes and mouth, and gave indications of a desire to become a penguin.

"Make—a—deal—of—diff-er-ence, sir," he repeated. "Aye, queer world. I suppose you consider Benjamin a sound man, eh, Gerard?—never heard anything to the contrary, eh?"

I affected a great surprise, and stared hard at Mr. Winterbee.

"Why, have you?" I said.

Mr. Winterbee laughed, chuckled, winked. We were walking up and down the Croft; there was not a human soul within five hundred yards of us, but

Mr. Winterbee lowered his voice to a confidential whisper.

"Hear some strange things, Gerard, if you keep your ears open," he said, still chuckling and winking. "Men will talk, sir; men will talk."

"If you've heard anybody talk," I said, "it must have been Daniel Metcalfe when you went to see him last night. He talks."

Mr. Winterbee winked and twitched more furiously than ever, and then nodded his head very knowingly.

"Your Uncle Benjamin owes Metcalfe five hundred pound," he said in a sibilant whisper. "Five—hundred—pound.! Owed it to him for three months, sir; three months, so Metcalfe says. Borrowed it just before last rent day. Looks bad that, Gerard—looks bad, sir. May come all right—may come all right—hope it does. Everything in your Uncle Benjamin's hands, you know, Gerard—everything. All his sisters' fortunes—all. Hum!"

I replied that I had been aware of that for a great many years, and that I had no doubt Uncle Benjamin would deal honestly with everybody, adducing as good evidence to that effect that he seemed to live in very handsome style and drove better cattle than ever. Mr. Winterbee chuckled suggestively.

"You'll not pay much attention to appearances, Gerard," he said, "after you've seen as much of the world as I have—no, sir, you won't. Fact, I assure you. Don't think much of Benjamin living in a fine house and driving good horses—no evidence of stability there, Gerard. May be doing it on nothing, sir. Bad sign, that borrowing from Metcalfe. And mark me, sir—Metcalfe not sort of man to wait for

his money—now that your grandmother's dead, sir, Metcalfe will be down on Benjamin like—like a steam-hammer."

"Five hundred pounds isn't much," I said.

"No, Gerard, no, a debt of five hundred pounds isn't much; and a debt of five thousand pounds isn't much if you've got the money to meet one or the other," said Mr. Winterbee, sententiously. "But if you haven't, well—— And, don't you forget it, sir, there may be other matters—there may be, you know."

"I hope everything is all right for my aunts," I said. "Of course, it wouldn't make much difference to Aunt Sophia, but it would make a big difference to Aunt Frances and Aunt Caroline."

"Your Aunt Sophia will no more want to lose her money than anybody else," said Mr. Winterbee. "Neither will your Uncle Richard; nobody wants to lose their money, sir, nobody! Not in human nature to desire to lose your money. Quite out of all reason to have such desires—weren't planted in us, sir—no!"

"Aunt Caroline's husband is a poor man," I said, "and Aunt Frances is not married. What would Aunt Frances do if she had no money?"

Mr. Winterbee shook his head and sighed deeply, and said it would be a bad job if everything was not all right. It was evident that what Metcalfe had told him about his loan of five hundred pounds to Uncle Benjamin had upset him considerably, and that his anxiety would not be set at rest until it had been found out how things stood—that was his own expressive phrase. He remarked to me in concluding this and other conversations on the same subject

that my grandfather had made a foolish will, and had given Benjamin too much power, and that his mother and sisters had subsequently trusted him too much, and his final summing up of the whole matter was that he was prepared for anything, having lived so long in the world that he was surprised by nothing.

"You never can tell, sir—you never can tell!" he said. "A man may seem as sound as a bell, and be nothing of the sort, sir. We shall see, sir, what we shall see."

There was nothing to be seen or heard, however, until after the funeral, a function which I would willingly have been spared, for it was conducted on the old-fashioned lines, and involved great preparations for eating and drinking. People came from all parts of the surrounding neighbourhood; the old farmstead was filled in every room an hour before the ceremony, and the assemblage flowed over into the garden and orchard. It might have been a fair instead of a funeral—wines and spirits were consumed freely in the parlours, ale flowed in the kitchen. Everybody expected solid refreshment and, at least, a pair of black kid gloves; people who were on intimate terms of friendship thought it their due to receive all the insignia of mourning—black scarves, hat-bands, gloves, and sable-bordered handkerchiefs. There was no silence, little sense of reverence—it was not difficult to see the connection between a ceremony like that and the old savage orgies celebrated centuries before around the bier of a tribal chief. It seemed to me that the latter-day observance was in the worst taste.

It was all over at last, however, and the old mistress was laid by her husband's side in the family

vault, and the big black-garbed crowd melted away over the snow-clad country, and the little family procession went back to the old house, wherein the serving-women had restored some sort of order. The blinds and curtains, closely drawn over the windows for four days and nights, were thrown back now, and the winter sunlight streamed gaily into parlours and kitchens. But the place was changed, and we all knew it without speaking of it.

There was a family dinner after our return from church, shared in by two guests who were not of the family, but had close relations with it—the family solicitor and the family doctor. I was glad of their presence—they made nearly all the conversation. Aunt Frances was too worn out to be more than apathetic, Aunt Sophia had felt her mother's death very keenly, and was tearful. Aunt Caroline was concerned about Aunt Frances. Neither Uncle Benjamin nor Uncle Richard talked at all. Mrs. Benjamin was there, but said little; there, too, were Thomas and Bertha. Thomas found the whole thing distasteful, and he scowled on Uncle Richard and on me, not being enough of a Harrington to act as if nothing had taken place between us.

We all knew that the solicitor had my grandmother's will in his pocket, and that it would be read by him after dinner was over. No one was so anxious to hear as Mr. Winterbee—indeed, I question whether there was anybody there, saving himself, who was particularly desirous of hearing it at that time—most of us, I think, would have been quite content to learn its contents at some later period. It seemed to me like the dividing of a dead man's garments, but it was evidently supposed to be the proper

thing to do, and everybody settled down to the solicitor's reading and to his explanations of what he read, as if it were the last painful honour they could pay to the deceased.

I suppose Mr. Winterbee and myself listened more carefully than anybody—he because of his anxiety to know how things stood; I out of sheer curiosity. And little by little through the various tangles of legal phraseology I began to get a fair conception of the position of things, and finally to understand just where the Harrington fortunes, so far as Highcroft Farm was concerned, were at that present moment—theoretically, at any rate.

What I made out—and my making out proved to be correct—was this: My grandfather at his death was worth a certain amount of money, made in the good days of farming, and apart from the value of the live and dead stock on the farm at the time of his decease. That certain amount of money he divided into three thirds. One third he left to his widow; one third to his eldest son, Benjamin, on condition that he managed Highcroft Farm for his mother until her death; the remaining third he divided amongst his remaining children. As for the stock on the farm, of whatever nature, he left it all to his widow, in whose ultimate wise disposition of the property he expressed his firm belief.

This "certain amount" left by my grandfather, irrespective of the value of the stock on the farm, was, roughly speaking, fifteen thousand pounds. Of this, then, my grandmother had become entitled to five thousand pounds, and Uncle Benjamin to a like amount; the remaining five thousand was to be distributed in equal shares between the sisters Mary (my

mother), Sophia, Frances, and Caroline, and the remaining brother, Richard. Of John Harrington, who had predeceased his father, no mention was made.

All this, because of some questions asked at the beginning of the proceedings, chiefly by Mr. Winterbee, was explained to us by the solicitor in detail before he informed us of the actual disposition of her property by my grandmother. Her will was simple enough. She left everything of which she died possessed to her son, Benjamin, whom she appointed her sole trustee and executor, under provision to realise all her property as quickly as possible, and to divide the amount remaining after her just debts had been satisfied between himself, her son Richard, and her daughters Sophia, Frances, and Caroline, and her grandson, Gerard Emery.

"That is all," said the solicitor, laying down his papers. He took his spectacles, and while polishing them looked round the circle of faces as if he wished to find some one who would be good enough to ask him a question. No one, however, wished to do so just then. But Mrs. Benjamin Harrington spoke:

"It seems an unfair thing to leave one grandchild anything when there's nothing left to the other two grandchildren!" she said, indignantly. "As unfair as anything I ever heard of!"

My Aunt Sophia turned on the interrupter like a fury.

"I'll not sit here to hear my dear mother called unfair by you or anybody, Martha!" she exclaimed. "Benjamin had the lion's share when my father died, and he ought to be thankful he gets anything at all now. Unfair, indeed! Talk about your own family's money and leave mine alone."

Uncle Benjamin pushed back his chair, rose, and looked at the solicitor. He paid no attention to his wife or his sister.

"I suppose that's all?" he said. "There's nothing more to stay for, is there? I want to be going—I've an appointment at home."

The solicitor gazed at all of us in general.

"If no one has any questions to ask——" he said. Mr. Winterbee sniffed.

"There are two or three questions——" he began.

"So far as I know," said Uncle Benjamin, with one of his best sneers, "you've no right to ask any questions."

"Very well, Benjamin, very well!" said Mr. Winterbee, obviously nettled. "I'm quite aware I've no legal rights. Since you stand on that, very well, Benjamin, I say, very well. I draw my own conclusions, Benjamin; I draw my own conclusions"

"I've a right to ask questions, at any rate," said Mrs. Winterbee, "and I'll have my questions answered, too. I want to know what is the value—there or about will do—of what my mother's left?"

The solicitor made a pantomimic gesture in the direction of Uncle Benjamin.

"Your brother, my dear madam, can tell you——"

"And, how do you suppose anybody can tell until everything's valued?" inquired Uncle Benjamin. "You'll know at the proper time."

"I'll know something before then, my lad!" said Mrs. Winterbee. "There ought to be a good deal of money, quite apart from the farm stock. Where is it—is it in railways, or banks, or building societies, or what is it in?"

"What's it got to do with you where it is?"

asked Uncle Benjamin fiercely. "So long as you get your share, what more do you want?"

"I want to know where my money is," replied Mrs. Winterbee, with great determination. "And where my sisters' money is—that's what I want to know. And I will know."

"Sophia!" said Aunt Frances, in an imploring voice. "Sophia—don't!"

But Aunt Sophia was roused—Mrs. Benjamin had roused her. And being roused, she was not the sort to be put down.

"Hold your tongue, Fanny!" she commanded, turning sharply on her sister. "You'd let anybody trample on you, and if I don't stand up for you, you'll be ending your days in a workhouse. Now, Benjamin, let's have a little plain talk. Are you going to tell us what the amount is—there or about—that my mother's left? Yes or no?"

"I've already told you that it's impossible to answer such a question until everything's realised," growled Uncle Benjamin, who was livid with anger. "Your own husband can tell you that, if you'd listen to him."

"Aye, but Sophia asked for information as to the approximate amount, Benjamin," said Mr. Winterbee. "Approximate amount, you know. Not a difficult thing to do, that. You could tell to a few hundreds."

"Are you going to tell, Benjamin?" asked Mrs. Winterbee. "You'd better."

"If you think I'm going to be forced by you," said Uncle Benjamin, "you're wrong. I care for neither you nor nobody, and I'll stand on my rights, since you're so masterful. There's a certain time allowed to get these things settled up, and I'll take it. I'm

master in this case, not you. You'll get your money at the proper time—not a day before."

"I wish I could think I should get it!" suddenly burst out Mrs. Winterbee. "Or that my sisters would, either. And now I'll have my say, whether it's pleasant or not, and I don't care who hears me. The real truth is, Benjamin, that neither Frances nor Caroline ever had their shares under my father's will—their money's in your hands to this day, and so is my mother's share. I got mine, for I didn't trust you even then, and I didn't approve of wives with fine notions about building grand new houses, and I was going to be on the safe side; but Frances and Caroline didn't get theirs from that day to this, as I say. And you were going to pay them interest on their capital, and sometimes you did, and sometimes you didn't. But, first and last, Benjamin, everything is in your hands, and—I want to know where it is?"

But Mrs. Winterbee got no response. Uncle Benjamin was plainly in a great temper and highly offended, and, without a further word to any of us, he marshalled his family from the room, and was presently heard shouting loudly for his dog-cart. My aunts retreated upstairs—to cry in their mother's empty room—the solicitor and the minister went away together, and Uncle Richard, Mr. Winterbee, and myself were left to stare at each other.

"Bad look-out, Richard," said Mr. Winterbee. "Bad look-out, sir. I don't like the look of things, sir—don't like 'em at all. Queer state of affairs, Richard—very queer. Most unbusinesslike."

Uncle Richard, who for some hours had looked more miserable and utterly out of place than I had ever seen him, stared at Mr. Winterbee with mourn-

ful eyes. Then an idea seemed to strike him; he provided himself with a drink from the decanter on the sideboard, and lighting a cigar, drew a deep breath of tobacco. "I suppose that's right about the girl's money?" he said presently. "Quite true, eh, Winterbee?"

"True, sir?—true as the clock, sir—my wife, sir, can always be depended upon for truth and fact, sir," answered Mr. Winterbee. "For fact and truth, sir, she is as—as good as Greenwich."

"It's a damned shame," said Uncle Richard. "A damned shame!"

I believe Mr. Winterbee admired Uncle Richard greatly for the careless, off-hand fashion in which he used this tabooed language—he certainly made no protest, and even said, "Just so—just so," when Uncle Richard repeated it, with more emphasis, a third time.

"I suppose you got your money all right, years ago, Richard?" said Mr. Winterbee, with a queer sort of expression which seemed to suggest that it would have been quite impossible for Uncle Richard to have existed *all these* years without it. "Got it, no doubt, when Sophia did? Stood no nonsense then, didn't Sophia, and won't now—not that sort, you know, sir."

Uncle Richard was stroking his beard in a perplexed sort of fashion. He looked at Mr. Winterbee in a queer way—as if he did not know whether to answer his question or not. Suddenly he laughed.

"A good deal later than Sophia," he said. "I—didn't press him."

"But you got it, of course?" said Mr. Winterbee. "I—had it," answered Uncle Richard. "Had it a

day or two. He—well, he borrowed it—said he could do with it just then. That's a long time ago."

Mr. Winterbee nearly exploded with surprise.

"Lor' bless my soul, Richard!" he exclaimed. "You don't mean it! Why, what a foolish thing to do—man in your position. Dear me!"

"Ah, you see I could do without it by that time," said Uncle Richard. "I didn't know what to do with it—at least, I wasn't hard up for it, and I thought he might as well have it. He was buying the land for his house just then—some men are never happy unless they have a house of their own or land of their own. Eh?"

Mr. Winterbee blew out his cheeks, stretched his elbows into position, and began one of his old penguin-like exercises.

"God—bless—me!" he said, after this was over. "Never heard of such things. Done nearly the whole family, sir—preposterous! Pre—pos—ter—ous! Mark my words, sir, there'll be nothing forthcoming. Feared it, sir; I feared it. Benjamin, sir, is in Queer Street. Sir, there's a man in this village that Benjamin Harrington owes five hundred pound to—five hundred pound! Farmer, sir—well-to-do man—Metcalfe, sir. Told me himself. Fact! Queer Street, sir, Queer Street—in Queer Street is Benjamin. Humph!"

Going out presently into the garden to cool my head after these agitations I found that Uncle Benjamin, however far along Queer Street he might be figuratively, was just then as regards the flesh in the road outside Highcroft Farm in company with a gentleman who I recognised in the fading light as Mr. Cheke, the steward. Mr. Cheke, whose offices

were in London, had presumably just driven over from Sicaster, and had called at the under-steward's house on his way to Wintersleave. These two were in earnest conversation with Uncle Benjamin in the middle of the road—Mr. Cheke's cab was awaiting him at a little distance; Uncle Benjamin's dog-cart, already tenanted by his wife and his son and daughter, stood ready at the garden gate.

I walked up and down the garden, watching the group in the middle of the road. Twilight was coming on; I could not see their faces distinctly. But I could see that the steward was speaking with much earnestness and animation; "laying down the law," as country folk would have said; that the under-steward was listening with half-averted face, nervously beating his leg with his riding-switch, and that Uncle Benjamin, the only motionless figure of the three, might have been a statue to which a man was talking. He made no sign.

The group presently broke up; the steward and under-steward went slowly towards the cab talking, with bent heads; Uncle Benjamin came with quick strides to his dog-cart. His horse, held by a stable lad, was pawing the snow restlessly. It broke away as it felt his foot on the steps—he leapt in and slashed at it with his whip. I heard him curse it and the lad as the dog-cart and its occupants dashed up the road.

Uncle Richard came out into the garden while I was there, and joined me in pacing up and down the paths. As we lingered, the moon rose above the ridge of the long barn, and lighted up the roofs and gables of the house, and made mimic fires of dancing white flames in the unlighted windows. The frost still held,

and was keener than ever, and the stars were bright and clear in the vapourless atmosphere.

I told Uncle Richard of what I had just seen—he heard me in silence, and beyond saying “Aye,” made no comment. But, presently, looking up at the old house and the trees around it, he sighed a little, and shook his head.

“I’m afraid the old days are over, lad,” said he. “The break-up of everything is coming. I’m glad the old mistress went before the family fortunes—for I fear me they’re going—and maybe going faster than we think.”

CHAPTER XX.

BROKEN.

IT was very gloomy and very depressing at Highcroft Farm that night. Everybody seemed to be full of foreboding. During the evening my aunts went across the Croft to the churchyard to visit their mother's grave. I saw them, three black figures moving amongst the snow-whitened tombstones, as I walked about the garden, which was infinitely preferable, in spite of the cold, to the dreariness of the house. When my aunts returned, they shut themselves up in the little parlour; in the big parlour Mr. Moseley read a book. Mr. Winterbee alternately read a newspaper and made calculations in his pocket-book, and Uncle Richard, smoking his pipe, drew aimless things on black-edged notepaper, which somebody had left lying about on the old writing-desk in the corner which had once been mine. Nobody seemed desirous of conversation; everybody, I think, was wondering what was going to happen.

Nor were things much better next morning. The family party began to break up. It was necessary for Mr. Moseley to return to the scene of his ministerial labours, and he and Aunt Caroline went away in a fly, which came for them as soon as they had finished an early breakfast. At the last moment Mr. Winterbee, who was a man of great activity and abhorred idleness, save in the way of a legitimate holiday, announced his intention of sharing the fly with them

to the railway—he would go, he said, and see how things were getting on at Kingsport; business was business, and must be attended to, in spite of everything. He seemed highly pleased to depart, and in promising to return for Aunt Sophia in a few days, impressed it upon her that they must then stay no longer than one night.

After Mr. and Mrs. Moseley had gone, Uncle Richard and his sisters fell into some private conversation, in which it was plain they had no mind to include me, and I accordingly strolled out of the house, not knowing exactly where to go, but feeling that anything was better than remaining indoors. With sheer aimlessness, I went about the farm buildings, glancing into granaries, stables, barns, and scarcely seeing them. Something which I was powerless to define seemed to have made this place strangely unfamiliar. I had known it so well—every yard of its ground, every stone in its walls, and now I felt as one feels who walks amidst strange things. I began to realise then what a far-off thing the remembered Past is.

Turning out of the stackyard into the narrow lane which ran outside its wall, and connected the main street of the village with the churchyard, I came across Mr. Metcalfe, who was leaning over the wall and gazing at Highcroft Farm with speculative eyes. He was a heavily-built, solid-jawed man, who always garbed himself in drab whipcord and top-boots, and had a considerable expanse of red handkerchief hanging out of his capacious hip pockets—he looked no whit older or different than when I first remembered him, unless it was that his rosy cheeks were fatter, and that his little, sly eyes seemed to

have retreated farther under his bushy brows. He made a critical inspection of me as I drew near him, looking me up and down as if I was a young bullock or a rising colt. His nod was a combination of unwilling civility and natural churlishness.

"Mornin', young man!" said Mr. Metcalfe.

"Good morning, Mr. Metcalfe," I returned.

"Fine, seasonable mornin'," he said, taking off his hat, and polishing his almost bald head. "Warm i' th' sun, too!"

"Yes," I said.

"You've growed up quite a young gentleman sin' I seed you," he continued, growing personal. "Settled down to London ways, I reckon—you'll be a good many cuts above us country bumpkins now, eh?"

"I hope I shall never forget old friends," I answered diplomatically.

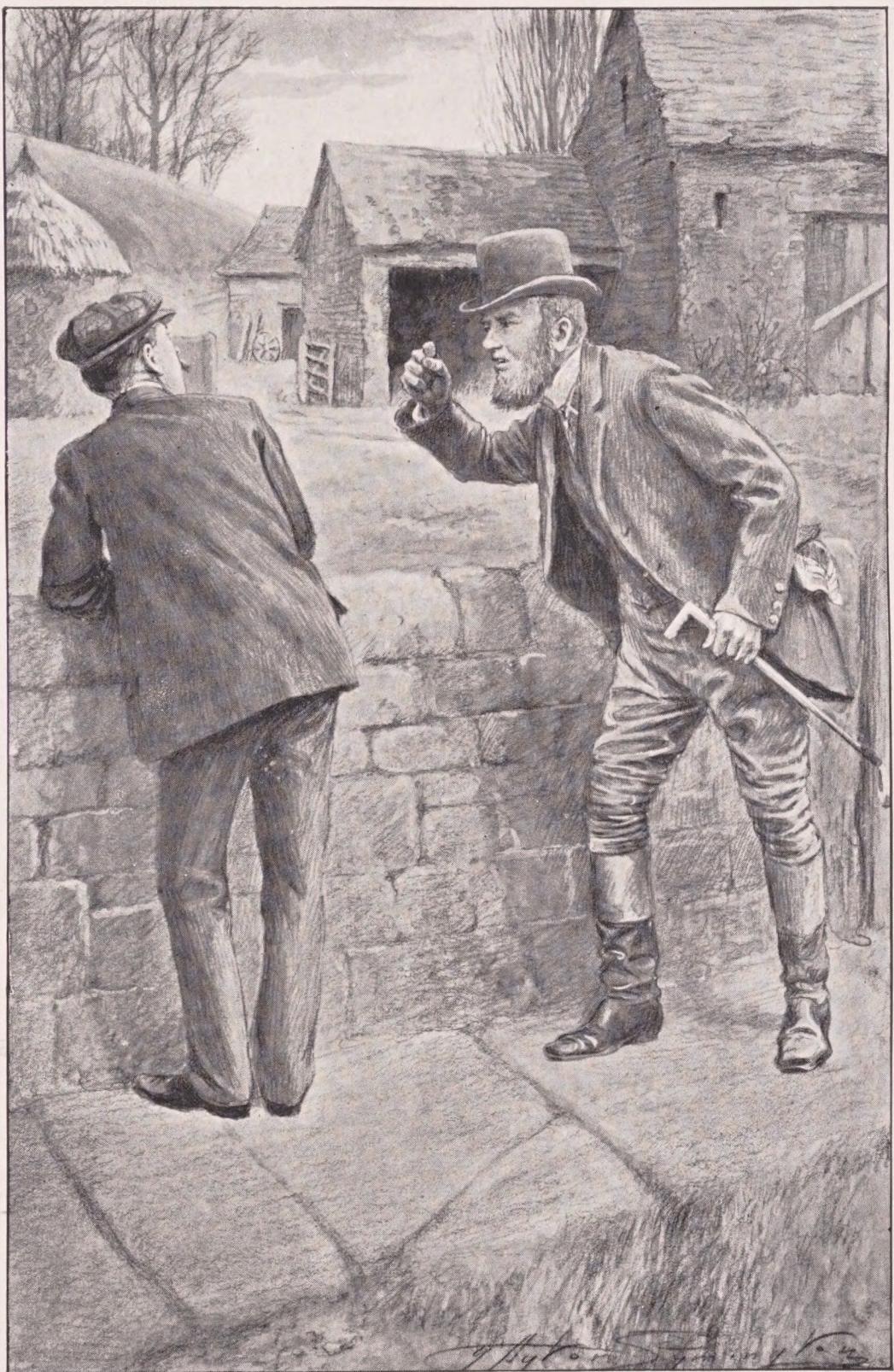
"Humph!" he grunted. "It's not many as bothers much to remember 'em, tak' my word for't, young man. There's a deal of ingratitude i' this world."

I said that I quite agreed with him. He grunted again, seeming almost dissatisfied to find that I did not contradict him.

"You'll be expectin' your uncle, Benjamin Harri'ton, down here this mornin', I expect?" he asked, presently. "Do you happen to know what time he's comin'?"

"I don't know at all, Mr. Metcalfe," I replied.

"I want to see Benjamin Harri'ton," he said. "I want to see him partik'lar. I mun hev' some talk wi' Benjamin—we mun come to a reight understandin'."



"FIVE HUNDRED—THAT'S WHAT BENJAMIN HARRINGTON
OWES ME.'"

(p. 323.)

"Yes?" I said.

"Yes," he repeated. "A reight, square, fair understandin', as between man and man. Benjamin Harrington owes me a matter o' money."

"Indeed, Mr. Metcalfe!" I said.

"Five hundred pound!" he exclaimed, striking the wall with a leg-of-mutton fist. "Five hundred pound! Five hundred—that's what Benjamin Harrington owes me."

"Well, I suppose he'll pay you, Mr. Metcalfe," I said. "You're not afraid of losing it, are you?"

He took off his square-topped billycock hat again, and again polished the shining dome of his head.

"I could like to see it," he said. "I could like to see it, young man. I hev' my suspicions. Things is not all reight here."

"What—at Highcroft?" I asked.

"No, they aren't," he snorted loudly. "Ye knew summat about farmin' yersel when ye wor a lad—ye'd plenty o' hard tewin' at it, onyway!—and ye owt to see how things is here. Look theer, now—what do yer mak' of a sight like that theer?"

He swept his arm in front of him, from left to right, with a comprehensive gesture. I followed the sweep of his arm.

"Look at that theer!" he repeated, with a curling lip. "Ye know what that means?"

Now that I did look, I knew only too well. I had been thinking of abstract matters ever since I came to Wintersleave, and had not observed the practical side of things narrowly. But I had only to give one understanding glance at the scene immediately before us to recognise the significance of Mr. Metcalfe's remarks.

The stackyard was almost empty. There was a stack of wheat in one corner; another of barley near it. The rest of the wide expanse was a desert. And the year was not yet out!

"He began threshing his stuff afore it wor well thacked," said Mr. Metcalfe. "He mo't just as weel ha' had t' threshin' machine as soon as harvest wor ovver. It wor a good harvest an' all—I counted sixteen stacks o' wheat, twelve o' barley, and six o' wooäts i' this here stackgarth when they'd finished leadin'. How many on 'em's left? Two. He mo't as weel ha' sell'd 'em out o' t' fields. Look at that theer, I say—we all know what t' meanin' is."

I knew the meaning and significance of the empty stackyard well enough. To sell one's wheat, barley, oats straight off, before they have settled down in the stack, almost "out of the fields," as Mr. Metcalfe put it, means a shortness of capital, a want of ready money, that signifies—a breakage.

"An' he's been sellin' straw off t' farm an' all," continued Mr. Metcalfe. "There's nowt i' t' leases o' these Wintersleave farms to prevent it, as there should be; but it's a poor farmer 'at sells his straw off a farm like this here. An' tak' ye a bit o' notice—I know how Benjamin Harri'ton's been sellin' t' best o' t' stuff. He sell'd his wool as soon as it wor off t' sheep's-backs—if he'd nobbut waited a piece he'd ha' gotten fourpence i' t' pound more. An' it were t' same wi' t' tatties—he sell'd 'em afore they were rived out o' t' earth! An' what's it all mean? No ready brass—no ready brass!"

He polished his bald crown again, and once more thumped the wall on which he was resting.

"An' there's more nor that," he continued, evi-

dently intent on emptying his mind. "There's more nor that. Look round t' farm. It's not half stocked—it's t' worst stocked farm there is i' t' parish, an' I can remember when it wor t' best. Look i' that fold-yard theer—theer's next to nowt feedin' in it. What cattle theer's been has gone off to t' market as soon as they wor owt like. It's been nowt else but sellin' owt as theer wor to sell for t' last year."

Once again he smote the wall with his big, red fist.

"Aye!" he went on. "An' don't ye think 'at all this hasn't been takken notice on. It hes. Them 'at cam' to t' berryin' yesterday, they took notice on it—they did so! An' what did t' steward hissen come down for fro' London yesterday? He's i' t' place now, and ye'll see 'at he'll stop here at Downes's till he's putten summat reight. It's my opinion, 'at there's some rent in arrears. Ye see, it wor i' this way—so long as t'owd lady wor alive they wo'dn't do nowt, 'cause she wor that respected, and reightly. But now 'at she's ta'en above, they'll be down on Benjamin like thunderbolts—they will that."

"They seem to be losing no time," I said, a little bitterly, and almost reminding him that my grandmother was scarcely cold in her grave.

"Why should they?" he inquired fiercely. "I wor sartin' sure 'at t' steward 'ud be down as soon as 't owd lady's death cam' to his ears. He'll be wantin' to know wheer things is, like. So do I. An' I mun know!"

"Mr. Metcalfe," said I, "if you thought that things were going wrong, why did you lend my uncle five hundred pounds?"

Mr. Metcalfe dashed one fist against another and groaned.

"Because I wor a gre't damned fool!" he almost shouted. "A gre't damned fool, an' I deserve 'at onnybody should call me one, an' all. But he's t' persuadin'est tongue 'at iver I heerd, hes Benjamin Harri'ton. He telled me 'at he wor formin' t' brewery consarn into one o' these here limited liabilities, and theer wor a real live lord goin' to be on t' board o' directors, and he showed me a balance-sheet 'at showed 'at theer'd been a rare profit on t' business, and promised me a hundred shares for nowt."

"I see," I said. "You wanted to make a nice profit out of your five hundred pounds' investment in my uncle's good faith, Mr. Metcalfe. Just so. And how do you know that the brewery isn't all right, and that you won't be paid?"

Mr. Metcalfe screwed up his pig-like eyes until they could scarcely be seen amidst the encircling rolls of fat. He closed the right one in a knowing wink.

"'Cause I've heard 'at the brewery's all wrong, my lad," he said. "There's been some queer talk of late about Benjamin Harri'ton i' more places nor one. It's my idea 'at t' brewery's been like t' farm—it's none been payin'. Onnyway there's been a drain on t' brass somewheer, and as I've a right to know if I'm goin' to be paid back, and when it's to be, I mun hev' a straight talk wi' Benjamin next time he's down here, and if he doen't come, I mun go to him."

Uncle Benjamin, however, did not come to Wintersleave that day, nor the next. The farm hands wanted instructions from him, and had to take them from Aunt Frances. Uncle Richard and myself, going round the farm, speedily recognised the truth of Mr. Metcalfe's observations to me. There was very little stock; the horses were in poor condition;

the men seemed to have been left to their own devices of late, and the state of the land was not likely to satisfy a jealous eye.

We were not surprised, any of us, when Mr. Cheke called at the house on the third day of Uncle Benjamin's absence. He was kindness and politeness itself; he was also an incarnation of firmness. In the midst of a family conclave, to which I was admitted, he told us some truths, at which Uncle Richard, Aunt Sophia, and myself had already guessed pretty well; against which, up to now, poor Aunt Frances, who, for some reason, cherished a true loyalty to her brother Benjamin, had strongly protested. After hearing Mr. Cheke even she was obliged to admit that Aunt Sophia was quite right in saying that things had come to a pretty pass. Mr. Cheke's statement was brief. There had been no rent paid for three years. It had been observed that the farm was being neglected. The value of the present stock was not in accordance with the size of the farm nor with its past traditions. It was known that Uncle Benjamin was—apart from his connection with the farm—in difficulties. And finally, the outstanding rent must be paid or security given for its payment, or possession must be taken of the live and dead stock in defence of the landlord's interests. In conclusion, Mr. Cheke advised us to see Uncle Benjamin at once, and to point out to him the seriousness of the situation. He, himself, he said, had done all he could. Uncle Benjamin had made an appointment to meet him on the morning after the funeral, in order to settle the matter; he had now waited nearly three days, and the appointment had not been kept, and he could wait no longer.

There was a painful scene when Mr. Cheke had departed. We all felt keenly the disgrace which must attach to the family name if these eventualities were forced upon us, yet nobody could see any way of avoiding them. Everything depended upon Uncle Benjamin—he was the basket into which all the eggs had been put, and the basket seemed to be smashed or in the process of smashing.

I think Aunt Frances was the most affected of all. That she cared nothing for herself I knew; she would endure poverty, if need be, with all cheerfulness, meekness, and patience. But she had always cherished a vast devotion towards her mother, idolising her as a saint, and she felt it insupportable that anything in the shape of disgrace should attach to her mother's name. And over and over again as she and her brother and sister talked she repeated the same phrase, "If only the rent had been paid while my dear mother was still tenant, so that no one could have said a word against her!" It was vain that the rest of us pointed out to her that no one would ever say a word against her mother—she could not forget that her mother had, through no fault of her own, died in debt to the landlord.

In the midst of this conversation Mr. Winterbee arrived, having driven over from a wayside station some miles off. He was briefly informed—before he had time to refresh or rest, poor man—that things were about as bad as they could be. Aunt Sophia said that he must drive on at once to Sicaster, find Uncle Benjamin, and insist on his coming over to Wintersleave there and then. Mr. Winterbee showed no great liking for the task, but was induced to go through with it on its being pointed out to him that

he was a business man (Uncle Richard and myself, in the opinion of Mrs. Winterbee, were not), and therefore the only person present capable of undertaking any business. He drank a cup of tea, shook his head a good deal over it, made several strange ejaculations, and set out. He seemed somewhat relieved when I offered to accompany him.

"Don't think we shall do any good, you know," he said as we drove along to Sicaster. "No good at all, in my opinion. My opinion, sir, is that Benjamin is up a tree. Up a tree is Benjamin. Up a tree, sir, from which very few men can get down without breaking their necks. Bad business—bad business. Kept it very quiet—lots of 'em do. How they manage to do it I don't know—I don't know how they manage to do it. No, I don't know. Can't know everything, though—not to be expected. Strange world is this, sir—v-e-r-y stra-a-ange world. Fact of the matter is, sir—longer I live, sir, more I learn. Live much longer, don't know what I shan't learn—fearful thing to think of, you know, fearful."

Everything looked very prosperous about Uncle Benjamin's fine house. There was a smart maid to answer the door, and she made haste to inform us that her master was away on business, and that it was her mistress's At Home day. Mr. Winterbee sniffed several times on hearing this, and made some attempts to begin his penguin exercises, but suddenly relinquished them, and, marching into the hall, demanded to see Mrs. Harrington on the instant.

We waited for Mrs. Harrington in a small room wherein Uncle Benjamin evidently transacted such business as he did at home. It was furnished heavily, like a board-room, but in spite of its solid furniture

it seemed curiously empty that winter afternoon. I wanted to get out of it as soon as possible. But Mrs. Harrington—no longer Mrs. Benjamin now that the old mistress was gone—evidently considered it the proper thing to keep us waiting. There was no fire, and it was chilly.

Mrs. Harrington was coldly polite to Mr. Winterbee when, at last, she came to us; me she ignored altogether. She said that Benjamin had been away on business for three days, and might return that night or next day—she didn't know which. If it was anything about the farm, she added, that he was wanted for, she didn't care if he was away a month.

"Serious matter, Martha, serious matter, you know," said Mr. Winterbee. "Great responsibility has Benjamin about the farm just now. Bad thing for Benjamin if things go wrong. Things are in a bad state, Martha—no doubt about it—none."

"I don't care that in however bad a state they are!" said Mrs. Harrington, snapping her fingers. "If Benjamin had taken my advice he'd have left the place alone years ago, unless his mother had paid him properly for all the time he gave to it. Small thanks he's had for all he's done!"

Mr. Winterbee sniffed a good deal, winked his eyes violently, and taking out his handkerchief fired several shots in the air with it. This giving him new courage, he looked at Mrs. Harrington with a very judicial expression.

"It's all very well talking, you know, Martha," he said, "all very well talking—talk's cheap. I'm a business man—you're a business man's wife. If you know where Benjamin is, get him home. There'll be trouble at Highcroft, if you don't."

Mrs. Harrington laughed sarcastically.

"There can be all the trouble in the world at Highcroft for what I care," she said. "I'll take good care that Benjamin's clear of it before the year's out. It's been nothing but a drain on him, whatever some folks may say, and all the reward he gets is an unjust will like—"

"Better go, Gerard," said Mr. Winterbee, sniffing and winking more than ever ; "better go, I think. Great mistake, Martha, not to send for Benjamin at once. Poor work, offering good advice, though—poor work."

Mrs. Harrington smiled very proudly and deigned no reply. We went into the hall: ah, my dear madame, you little thought that the unexpected was at that instant—literally—on your threshold!

The hall door was open, and the smart maid was holding conversation with a smart-looking young man who stood just within the hall. Outside, on the steps, another individual, quietly and a little shabbily attired, stood in the unmistakeable attitude of one who awaits further orders.

The maid, evidently perplexed, turned to her mistress.

"This young man wants the master, ma'am—" she began.

"Why haven't you told him the master isn't at home, then?" demanded the mistress, sharply. "Mr. Harrington is out of town, young man—you must call again in a few days."

The young man smiled and approached Mrs. Harrington.

"Can I have a word with you, ma'am?" he said, and, without waiting further permission, he drew still

nearer and murmured a few words, which neither Mr. Winterbee nor myself caught.

But we saw their effect. Mrs. Harrington reeled back against the hall table as if she had been struck. I moved quickly to her assistance—she pushed me off.

"It's—it's not—true!" she panted, staring at the newcomer. "It—can't—be true."

"It's quite true, ma'am—and quite in order," he answered. "Here are the papers."

He laid some papers on the table, and turning again to the door, made a signal with his hand. The man waiting outside came in, and taking off his hat, wiped his feet carefully on the thick mat, and fell to a respectful admiration of whatever his eyes fell on.

Mrs. Harrington turned to Mr. Winterbee. Her mouth was twisted a little, and her breath came and went in gasps.

"This man—says—he's—an—execution," she panted. "It—can't—be—true. Can't—be—true—I—say."

"It's quite right, sir," said the man, turning to Mr. Winterbee. He glanced at the open door of the little room which we had just quitted, and then at the maid, who stood open-mouthed watching her mistress. "If we can step inside, sir, I'll show you that it's all right."

We went inside the room—Mrs. Harrington, Mr. Winterbee, myself, the sheriff's officer. The latter turned the papers over rapidly.

"All in order, sir," he said. "Suit of Goldsmid and Nathan, financial agents (money-lenders, they are, sir), of Clothford—total amount, with costs, two—four—six—nine, eight, and three. Got judgment ten days ago, you see, sir. Execution issued yester-

day—all correct, sir. Glad to be paid out, I assure you."

Mr. Winterbee put the warrant back on the table.

"It's all right, Martha," he said. "Quite right. You'd better send for your husband at once. Come, Gerard, we must be off—can't keep that trap waiting for ever, you know."

Mrs. Harrington followed us into the hall. She was trembling all over.

"Can—can they sell anything?" she asked.

"Every stick in the place till they're satisfied," answered Mr. Winterbee.

She moaned as if her life's blood were being forced from her heart, and she suddenly clutched at Mr. Winterbee's arm.

"William," she said, "lend me the money—lend me it! I'll pay you back when my father dies—I'll——"

Mr. Winterbee got his arm loose. "Much better see your father, Martha," he said. "Wealthy man, your father, you know—warm man. Said to be so, at least. I don't know—no. Never believe anything now. The fly, Gerard, the fly!—horse'll be catching its death of cold."

We went out. A grandly-dressed lady in heavy silks and satin peered at us through the slightly-opened door of the drawing-room, where Mrs. Harrington's guests were doubtless wondering what had become of their hostess. The sheriff's officer's man, still respectfully admiring the steel engravings, the foxes' heads, and the plate-glass of the hall-stand, touched his forelock.

"All up!" said Mr. Winterbee as we drove away into the wintry gloom. "All up, sir. A clean smash!"

God bless my soul! Shouldn't have believed it if I hadn't seen it. Wonderful man, sir, Benjamin—kept a stiff upper lip to the end. Marvellous! But come a regular cropper, sir—a regular c-r-o-p-p-e-r. Dear me!"

So we had nothing but the worst news to carry home to Wintersleave. My aunts could scarcely believe it at first, for Uncle Benjamin, after the family tradition, had been the closest of men, making nobody, not even his wife, his confidant, and whoever else might have had some notion of his affairs they had scarcely any. And for the fiftieth time poor Aunt Frances regretted the fact that rent was owing for the farm while it was still in her mother's tenancy.

After tea that night Uncle Richard disappeared. He was absent, no one knew where, for an hour. When he came back to us in the little parlour he threw a piece of paper on the table at which Aunt Frances was sitting.

"There, Fanny," he said, "I've paid every penny of the rent for the last three years and up to next Lady Day, and there's the receipt. And now, my girl, there's no one in the world can say that our mother died owing anybody anything—so dry your tears and get me out a drop of whisky."

CHAPTER XXI. INTO THE VALLEY.

I WAS obliged to return to town next day, and had to journey alone and to face the prospect of some indefinite period of loneliness, for Uncle Richard announced his intention of staying at Highcroft Farm until everything was settled. There was no doubt that the end of the Harrington connection with it had come—the tenancy would cease, the stock, live and dead, be sold at auction, and ere many months were over new faces would be seen about the old house. In the meantime, until some arrangement could be made, poor Aunt Frances must needs stay at the farm, and Uncle Richard, in that brusque, half-grumbling way of his, which, I believe, he deliberately assumed when he was doing anybody a kindness, said that he was going to stay with her. He wrote out a list of things which he wished sent down—it was evident from their character that he contemplated a stay of, at any rate, a few months at Wintersleave, and that he intended to work while he was there. I was glad that he had these occupations—in spite of the troublous times through which we had just passed, I knew that he was missing Sylvia, although he scarcely ever spoke of her, and then only to me with seeming indifference.

Mr. and Mrs. Winterbee and I drove to the station together on our departure. Mr. Winterbee was

plainly glad to get away—he was looking forward to the substantiality of his drapery establishment, and revelling in the thought that there was nothing uncertain about his affairs. Every now and then he kept bursting into laughter. His wife asked him once or twice what it was that amused him, but got no answer other than a renewed chuckling. But as we neared our journey's end he deigned to inform us of the reason of this outburst of mirth.

"Most extraordinary thing, you know, Sophia!" he said, suddenly becoming very serious. "Most extraordinary thing I ever heard in my life. God bless my soul, never knew anything like it!"

"What's the most extraordinary thing, William?" inquired Mrs. Winterbee, a little peevishly.

"Why, your brother Dick paying that rent!" replied Mr. Winterbee. "Never knew such a thing! Fellow might be a millionaire, throwing his money away like that. Know how much it was, Sophia, know how much it was? Nearly eight hundred pound! Fact! Eight hundred pound—might ha' been eight hundred pence for all he seemed to care. And I'll lay you, Sophia, the Bank of England to a penny piece that Dick couldn't find another eight hundred to match it. Not he! I know 'em, those sort of fellows—live from hand to mouth, Sophia, live from hand to mouth. S'prising thing to me that Dick had eight hundred pounds to throw away like that. Old saying true, however—fools and their money, you know, Sophia——"

"I don't want to hear any more, William," said Mrs. Winterbee, waxing rapidly towards an inclination to show temper. "If my brother Richard chooses to use his money in freeing our dear mother's farm

from any chance of a reproach, it's naught to you. It wasn't your money."

"No, by Jingo, it wasn't!" said Mr. Winterbee with another explosion of satirical laughter. "I should think it wasn't, Sophia, I should think it wasn't! I'll take good care I never throw good money after bad—you trust me. I've worked too hard for my money, Sophia; worked too hard, you understand. My money, indeed!—no, I should think not. I'm not like these painting fellows—I can't paint a cow and a tree or two, and get some titled fool to fork out a thousand guineas for it. I have to work for my money, Sophia, work from morn till eve, as the Psalmist says. And folk who work for their money, Sophia——"

"I'm sick of hearing about money, William," interrupted Mrs. Winterbee, assuming one of her resigned airs. "If people wouldn't think so much about money, there'd be less harm done in the world."

"God bless my soul, Sophia!" exclaimed Mr. Winterbee. "Not think about money—not think about money? Why, what on earth is there that's worth thinking about but money? Never heard such rid-ic-ulous nonsense! Not think about money? Pooh! Bosh! We all think about money—I think about money—Gerard there thinks about money. What does he do with his writings? Sells 'em for money—if he can. What's Dick do with his pictures? What's he paint 'em for? Money, Sophia, money. Not think about money? Don't tell me, Sophia—it's damn—it's confounded nonsense, ma'am. Why, the very parsons themselves are as keen as the dev—keen as the east wind about——"

"If you are going on any further in that way,

William," said Mrs. Winterbee, who was obviously upset, "damning and devilling like a low, common person, and your wife and your nephew in the cab with you, I shall pull the check-string and walk to the station. You've had a Christian bringing-up, and a Christian wife, and you ought to know better than to devil and damn, and I beg there's no more said."

So Mr. Winterbee relapsed into silence and sniffs, and was fairly quiescent until we reached the station. But when Aunt Sophia had stalked indignantly into the first-class waiting room to refresh herself with a little weak whisky-and-water which she carried in a medicine bottle safely hidden in her handbag, he remarked to me with many winks and nods that women were strange creatures, and that even the cleverest of them were given to making fools of themselves at times.

"Able woman, your Aunt Sophia—you know, Gerard, able woman," he said, flapping his arms. "Clever woman, sir, but sentimental as your Aunt Fanny herself over this business of Dick's paying the rent. Generous on his part, you say? Bosh, sir, bosh!—generosity begins at home. Do well to yourself first, sir, then think about other people. Hope that you'd have done the same thing, sir, if you'd had the chance? Then let me tell you, sir, let me tell you that you'll never be a rich man. Never die a warm man, sir, if you indulge those sort of sentiments. Can't afford 'em myself. My object in life, sir—pay twenty shillings in pound, and keep out of workhouse—I can't go throwing eight hundred pounds away for a mere whim. No; leave that to wealthy men like your uncle Richard—millionaires, sir!"

It was hopeless to attempt to stop Mr. Winterbee

if he got on a subject like this, and I was glad when one train carried him and Mrs. Winterbee east, and another whirled me south. But I was still more glad to know that Aunt Sophia, who had always been down on Uncle Richard because of his eccentricities, his defiance of convention, his indifference to the things which she worshipped, had begun to think better of him, and possibly to understand him rather more. She knew very well what it was that prompted him to pay the overdue rent, and in spite of her sharp tongue and her worship of the false gods, she had a good heart, and would have had a better if she had let it be warmed at the fires near which she would not go.

It was not for a week or two after my return to London that I heard any particulars of the utter ruin of Uncle Benjamin. Utter ruin it was. No other term was applicable to the state in which he found himself. He was, as Mr. Winterbee had truly observed, up a tree from which it was impossible to descend without smashing. As fate would have it, he was violently flung ere he could attempt a descent, and the result was a total wreckage. As I read more of the letter in which Uncle Richard conveyed these tidings to me, I thought of what Aunt Caroline had said to me years before in the garden at Highcroft on the night of Uncle Richard's arrival there—that Uncle Benjamin was foolish in building a new house and letting his wife goad or force him on to spending money which he could not afford. For there—now that things were coming out—lay the beginning of this, the calamitous end. He had borrowed money wherewith to buy the land. He had borrowed money wherewith to build the house.

Then, with the notion of getting hold of that money in an easy way, Uncle Benjamin had begun to speculate. He had speculated pretty considerably. Once or twice—so it was made out from his papers—he had been in a position to pay every penny he owed in the world, and to retain a handsome balance for himself. Instead of pursuing this eminently wise course, he had plunged into further speculations, which, if they had ended properly, would have left him a rich man. Unfortunately, they turned out the wrong way—not once or twice, but in a steady, persistent fashion. How he had kept on, said Uncle Richard, was a marvel. How he had slept, eaten, drunk, preserved an unruffled countenance, managed to pay out or to stave off importunate creditors was nothing short of a miracle. In the end everything had gone against him. He had made one desperate effort, with all that remained to him, on the very day after his mother's burial—and he had failed.

It required very little penetration to see that Uncle Richard, if he had been wealthy enough to do it, would have discharged all his brother's liabilities and set him on his legs again in the house surmounted by the gazebo. He harped in his letter on the beastly hardships entailed on a man by our cursed commercial system, and said that Ben would have had much more for his money if he had traded with starting-price merchants than with bucket-shops, adding that had he known that Uncle Benjamin was really put to it like this he would have advised him to try his luck on the Turf, and given him some sound counsel as to the best ways of doing so. I was amused at this, for I knew Uncle Richard—I had been with him to Epsom and to Ascot. His notion was

to pick out an absolute outsider, starting at impossible odds, to assure himself and everybody that nothing could beat it, to put all his money on it, and to assume an important air, and finally, when it hobbled in last, to explain that but for accidents——

However, there was the end of the Harrington connection with Highcroft Farm. There was to be no money for anybody—for Uncle Richard, or for Aunt Sophia, or Aunt Frances, or Aunt Caroline, or for me. The sale of the stock and the amount of the valuation would just about discharge the outstanding debts on the farm, and after that there would be an end. The old house would know us no more.

But we were all to see Highcroft Farm again, and under circumstances which it was as well we had not foreseen. It had been a trouble to me to witness the break-up which followed so closely on the death of my grandmother, but it was as nothing in comparison to the sorrow which, even then, was not far away.

I went home one evening towards the end of January to find a telegram lying on my desk. Arabella, who was spreading the tablecloth in readiness to the serving of my dinner, said that it had come about four o'clock in the afternoon. When I had torn it open and realised its meaning, I cursed myself for my foolishness in not having arranged that any message of its sort should be sent on to me at the office immediately on receipt. Then I looked at my watch, and cursed myself still more.

It was a brief message from Aunt Frances, but it changed the whole world for me.

“Richard has had serious accident—the doctors fear the worst—come at once.”

It struck me in a curious, muddled fashion that here was one of those very sensations for which poor Arabella had waited so long and so patiently. She was staring at me with wide-opened eyes, as I read and re-read the words scribbled on the scrap of flimsy paper—it almost forced me to laughter to think how, with a word or two, I could harrow her soul. But I did just what I suppose all commonplace persons like myself do under similar circumstances—nothing out of the commonplace. I crumpled the yellow envelope and its pink enclosure into a ball, and thrust the ball into my waistcoat pocket, and, instead of saying that the world seemed to have suddenly fallen about my ears, I asked Arabella some trifling question connected with my dinner. But when she had left the room, I extracted the paper ball from its hiding-place and smoothed it out, read it again and again, and looked at the post-mark denoting the time of its dispatch and the post-mark denoting the time of its receipt, and turned it this way and that, and wondered, vaguely and purposelessly, how so frail a thing could be fraught with tidings of such moment.

I ate my dinner as if nothing had happened. I neither hurried over it nor refused any part of it. I knew that it was hopeless to endeavour to get down to Wintersleave that evening, but I meant to travel there during the night, and I made myself eat, so that I should be equipped in some measure for my journey. And after dinner I made my preparations, putting on my thickest and warmest clothes, and making ready a thick overcoat and a rug, and at last I set out, refraining at the very last from an insane desire to tell Arabella that an awful thing had happened to me.

There was only one way by which to reach High-

croft Farm that night. Trains to any station near Wintersleave there were none, but the mail stopped at an important junction twelve miles away. In as bitter a night as ever I travelled I got down there, found a conveyance, and sped over iron-hard roads towards the old village, sick with fear lest I should be too late.

It was four o'clock in the morning when we stopped at the little wicket-gate which gave admittance to the paddock. There were lights in two or three lower windows of the house, and there was one lighted window upstairs. The rattling of the wheels of my cab had evidently attracted attention ; the door of the kitchen opened, and a dark, shawled figure was outlined for a moment against the light within. It came along the path. I was out of the cab in an instant, and, hastening towards it, fearing, dreading to hear that—

I never knew how much I loved Uncle Richard until I heard Mrs. Winterbee's voice telling me that he was alive. My anxiety, and the long, bitterly cold journey, and the sudden relief of hearing that he was not dead, seemed to deprive me of all sorts of things—speech amongst them—and I felt as if I were in a dream, until I found myself in the little parlour, drinking something very hot, and being made much fuss of by my aunts, all three of whom were in attendance upon me. And then I heard of the accident and of what then seemed its probable result.

Uncle Richard had spent most of his time at Wintersleave in making things as easy and as pleasant as he could for Aunt Frances—it was plain, from the few things which she said that night, that he had made special efforts to keep her from brooding

over the family misfortunes. He had read to her, talked to her, told her of his travels, and of the men and women he knew—she had come to understand him much better, she said tearfully, during the past month. He had been working at a new picture—a winter scene—and had turned one of the rooms into a studio. The only relaxation he had taken was in shooting. He had always been fond of shooting as a boy, and had never missed a year since he settled in London without getting a week or two at partridge or grouse. Highcroft Farm was at this time somewhat freely stocked with rabbits—he had been in the habit of going out with his gun for an hour or two every day, and taking a shot at any that he chanced across. And on the previous morning he had done a singularly foolish thing. Aunt Frances had been turning out the contents of an old cupboard, and had found a fowling-piece which Uncle Richard had used as a boy—an old, muzzle-loading affair that had been put away for years, and was only untrusted because it had happened to be laid aside in a dry, warm place, together with his powder-flask and shot-flask. She had shown these to him—nothing would suit him but that he should clean it up and go forth to have a shot with it. He was cleaning and polishing and making wads and talking about the joys of using a ramrod again half the morning—then he went out, saying that the old gun made him think of the days when he used to go crow-scaring. And after that Aunt Frances heard and saw no more of him until some men brought him back, bleeding and unconscious.

They thought that he had meant to shoot some wood-pigeons, and had been keeping an eye on

them as they perched in the grove of beech trees, where he was found, while at the same time he rammed a charge home into the left barrel of the old gun. What had then happened no one ever knew—it was surmised that the contents of the right barrel were discharged, and that he had been so careless in handling the gun that it was pointed towards himself. The shot had lodged in his left side—over the region of his heart, lungs, and shoulder. It was a wonder, the doctors had said, that he had not bled to death. It was also the doctors' opinion that the injuries would probably prove fatal, but on this point they were not in absolute agreement. Three of them—one a famous surgeon from Clothford—had been in attendance on him from within a few hours of the accident; it was the famous surgeon who, in a very guarded manner, held out some slight hope. It was a toss-up, he had said; the coin was spinning in the air—he did not yet know on which side it would come down.

One catches at any straw when one is suddenly thrown into these awful whirlpools—I caught at that and clung to it with fierce tenacity. I could not believe that Uncle Richard could be torn away from us like that. I thought of him, as I had always known him—queer, eccentric, whimsical, a very child in some things, a strong man in others. I thought of his generosity, and his goodness, and his Berserker-like tempers, and his black, ugly moods which could suddenly change to sunshine and to the winsomeness of a child, and I realised that it would be a poorer world to me if he died in the old chamber in which his mother had died only a few weeks before.

It was there that I saw him, many hours later.

It turned my heart sick to see him, whom I had never thought of as anything but active, lively, restless, brimming over with energy physical and mental, lying there as broken and torn as if he had been through the thick of a battle, and had reaped its harvest. There was a doctor and a nurse with him, and the old room was pungent with the smell of antiseptics. Everything represented poor, crushed humanity, struck down by blind fate, and it made me childishly angry to think that such a blow should have fallen here. There were thousands, tens of thousands of lives that might have been ruthlessly uprooted without loss to themselves or anyone. Why this?

He knew me when I bent over him, and there was a faint leaping of the old sardonic humour to his lips.

"Pretty hot dose this, lad," he whispered. "A real broadside!"

Then the ghost of a smile faded and a wistful look came into his eyes.

"I'd like the little girl to be here," he said. "The little—"

They bundled me out of the room then, and the doctor whispered fiercely that there must be no more talking. But just then I had no mind for talk. Uncle Richard's last words had projected an idea into my mind which I meant to carry out at once. Indeed, I wanted to carry it out so quickly that I did not wish even to think of it. It was one of those ideas which one must put into execution first and think about afterwards. In brief, it was that since Uncle Richard had wished for Sylvia, I was going to send for her.

I said nothing to any of my aunts of this intention,

but, setting off at once for Sicaster, I ascertained, after some inquiry of a local shipping agent, that one of the great ocean liners would be leaving New York next day—if she caught it, Sylvia would be with us in eight or nine days. It might be that she would come too late, but I knew very well that she would never forgive me if I had not afforded her the chance of coming. And she might come to find us all full of renewed hope, perhaps of assured hope.

I expended what seemed a very large sum in cabling to Sylvia a message which should bring her, and yet should not alarm her unduly. I made up my mind that when she came—there was no possible if in this eventuality—I would meet her at Liverpool. If there was bad news to give, she would hear it best from me; if there was good news, she and I had the best right to share it together, for we were Uncle Richard's children and disciples.

Coming out of the post-office at Sicaster I met Andalusia, whom I had not seen since my arrival, though she had twice called at the house to make personal inquiry after our patient's condition. She was driving back to Wintersleave in the small phæton which Mr. and Mrs. Wickham used to drive about in the old days, which already seemed so far off, and offered me a seat. She was full of sympathy about Uncle Richard and of hope for his recovery. She, too, was in trouble—her father was failing very fast, and she had discovered that since coming to Wintersleave he had been making ducks and drakes with all that remained to him—principally through the medium of the stockbroker at Clothford, who had seen the colour of most of Uncle Benjamin's money—and was now practically a pauper. Andalusia had

mapped out her life after his death. With him the title would become extinct—she herself meant to put off her rank and to become a nurse—perhaps she would join a nursing sisterhood. I did not even ask her not to do these things—something told me that it is best to wait and see what fortune has in store.

There was bad news when I got back to Highcroft—Uncle Richard was sinking. It was then afternoon; the doctor did not think he would live until next morning.

It was a hard thing to sit, to stand, to walk about, to lounge here, to wander aimlessly there, knowing one's utter impotence, helplessness—knowing, too, of the fight going on upstairs. We were all miserable. I had never known until then how fond of Uncle Richard his sisters were or had become. Aunt Frances and Aunt Caroline were in perpetual tears; Aunt Sophia was wondrous kind about everything; Mr. Winterbee, who had travelled over from Kingsport that morning, was graver than I had ever seen him.

"Sad job this, Gerard, sad job," he observed to me, as he and I sat in the little parlour. "Poor Dick—poor fellow—sorry for him beyond words, sir—beyond words. Terrible thing, you know, Gerard—terrible thing! Quite a young man, Dick—quite a young man! I'm a young man myself—two-and-fifty last birthday, I was, sir—young man as things go nowadays. And Dick—why, I should say Dick Harrington's a good ten years younger than I am—ten years younger! Quite a young man, just starting life. You're a mere boy, you know, Gerard—a mere boy, sir. Sad thing indeed for promising young man like Dick to be cut off in prime of life. Queer

fellow, Dick—but, God bless me, what of that? We're all of us queer in our ways. I often say to your Aunt Sophia—‘Sophia,’ I say—‘none of us, Sophia, are all that we might be. Perfection, Sophia, is not to be looked for here, and don't you expect it. You're not perfect yourself, you know, Sophia, not by any means. Not to be expected of anybody.’ Sadly cut up is your Aunt Sophia over poor Dick. Great grief to all of 'em if Dick dies. Very sentimental women are your aunts, you know, Gerard, very sentimental—always were.”

“They have found out that they are a good deal fonder of Uncle Richard than they knew they were,” I said.

Mr. Winterbee winked.

“Dick, sir,” said he, flapping his arms; “Dick, sir, touched them by paying that rent. Don't tell me, sir, that I don't know human nature. Know it, Gerard, as well as I know my own shops. Woman, sir, lovely woman, likes her heart to be touched. That's why so many of these rogues and rascals abound on every side. Not that poor Dick is either—dear me, no, not a word against Dick. Strange fellow, str-a-ange fellow, but a great many good qualities in Dick, Gerard, which you don't find in a good few sky-pilots of my acquaintance. Don't tell me, sir—don't tell me anything—human nature, sir, is just the same all the world over, especially with women. If you were set down, sir, on a desert island in the Pacific Ocean you'd find human nature, sir, to be just the same as in London, or Kingsport, or Winters-leave, or anywhere. Women thought Dick fine fellow, you know, for paying that rent—poor Dick. Never have seen his money again, you know, Gerard—never.

Foolish thing to do—young man to throw his money away like that—very. However, probability is never want it now—no. Might have left it to somebody else, though—might have left it to you. Nice thing for young fellow just starting out in life, a few hundred pounds—might have gone into some useful business with it. Poor Dick! in the midst of life we are in death, you know, Gerard—we are, indeed."

It was something of a relief to hear Mr. Winterbee talk, to watch his grimaces, his contortions, his occasional reverisons to the penguin state of life, for the tension was great. Upstairs the fight between life and death went on hour after hour; we who waited were like auxiliaries who would strain every nerve, crack every sinew, to help, and are yet bound hand and foot—powerless. There was some comfort for us in the heartfelt sympathy which came quietly to us from all sides. Men, women, and children to whom Uncle Richard's hearty and unaffected ways had made special appeal came stealing on tiptoe to the door hour after hour to make inquiry—a group of young men lingered near the house on the chance of being able to do something helpful by carrying messages or going errands. Andalusia came that evening and sat talking to us for some time. When I returned from escorting her to the Manor House, I found Mr Winterbee solemnly impressed, and so alive with nods, winks, and grimaces that I really wondered if he had developed some nervous affection.

"Handsome girl that, Gerard," he said. "Nice girl, too, sir—good disposition, I should say. Yes, sir, I should say so. Something—er—substantial about that girl, sir. Fine figure—hum! Father's very poor, I believe?"

I made some answer in accordance with Mr. Winterbee's belief.

"Aye, to be sure!" said Mr. Winterbee. "Just so—poor nobleman—lots of 'em, Gerard—nothing like trade, sir, if you want to make money. Fond of you is that girl, you know, Gerard—fond of you."

I stared at him, too surprised for speech. Mr. Winterbee shot out his arms, nodded his head, and winked furiously.

"I could see, sir, I could see—got two eyes in my head, as well as anybody," he said. "Know when a young woman casts soft looks on a young man. Something between you, eh?"

"Nothing, nothing!" I exclaimed.

"Plenty of time, plenty of time," said Mr. Winterbee. "Foolish to hurry matters. But—I can see, sir, I can see. Often told your Aunt Sophia that I could see further in those things than she could. Fact, I assure you. Dear me, an earl's daughter! Um-ah! Yes, just so. A queer world—a queer, topsy-turvy sort of world—strange things in it, to be sure. Seen stranger things than that, though—lots of 'em. Have a little fortune of her own, no doubt, Lady Andalusia—strictly tied up to her. Yes, seen even more improbable things than that."

I stared at Mr. Winterbee more than ever, not being able to make out his exact train of thought. And in truth I cared little just then what it was, for all my thoughts were of the fight going on in the old chamber upstairs, where so many Harringtons had gone into the valley and had either come back after hard fighting or passed through for ever to the other side.

CHAPTER XXII.

SETTLES MANY QUESTIONS.

NONE of us thought of going to bed that night ; there would have been no sleep for us if we had. We sat in the little parlour waiting for news. There were two doctors upstairs now—sometimes one or other of them came down, but could tell us little. The nurse came down, too, for supper. I wondered how she could eat and drink so heartily, and seem so quietly unconcerned until I remembered it was her duty to keep up her strength, and that she was used to scenes and occasions like this. As for the rest of us, we were restless and uneasy, and could neither eat nor drink. Aunt Sophia found some solace in wandering about the house, making work for herself ; Aunt Caroline followed in her wake, undoing what she had done. Mr. Winterbee walked up and down the parlour, exercising himself, and occasionally remarking that it was a bad job. As for me, I first sat in one corner and then in another, then put on an overcoat and walked in the garden, wishing always that some better news would come for our relief.

But of all of us Aunt Frances was the most discomposed. She went about the house like a ghost that cannot rest. Even Mr. Winterbee noticed her unusual agitation, and remarked upon it. It was plain to see that she was struggling with thoughts which were unknown to the rest of us ; she looked as if she

had something on her mind. And just about midnight, following upon a visit from one of the doctors, who informed us that there was little chance of Uncle Richard living until morning, she suddenly broke in upon our reflections in a startling fashion.

We were all in the little parlour, silent and sorrowful, under the news which we had just received. Aunt Sophia started up at last and made for the door.

"Well, the Lord's will be done!" she said. "But I can't sit doing nothing. I must move about. I'll go through the linen chest, Fanny, and——"

Aunt Frances lifted a very white and drawn face to her sister. She laid her hand tremblingly on Aunt Sophia's arm.

"Don't go, Sophia," she said. "Sit down again; there's something I want to tell you—to tell all of you."

There was a note in her voice which made us all look sharply at her. She sat plucking nervously at the table-cloth. It was easy to see from the trembling of her hands that she was much agitated.

"What's the matter, Fanny?" asked Aunt Sophia, with a quick appreciation of her sister's emotion. "Come, what is it?"

Aunt Caroline crossed the room, and, sitting at Aunt Frances's side, put her arm round her, with a sympathetic movement.

"Something's troubling you, Fanny," she said. "What is it?"

Aunt Frances swallowed a big lump in her throat and tried to face us bravely.

"It's—it's about Richard," she said. "I promised him that I wouldn't tell anybody until his death, or until he gave me leave to tell, but—now that he's so

near death—and the doctors say there is no chance—I want you all to know before he dies—so that you'll know—the truth. Because—it would be wrong if—if Richard died, leaving people under wrong impressions about him—and you see, I know—know!"

There was a curious silence in the room. This from Aunt Frances, the quietest Harrington of the lot! Know? What did she know?

"Perhaps," she went on, still plucking at the table-cloth, "perhaps we all were hard on Richard at one time, because his ways were not our ways, and he thought differently, and kept his own counsel, and seemed queer and strange. And we were harsh in our judgments of him. You, Sophia, were worse than all. I've thought a lot lately," said poor Aunt Frances, with the ghost of a little laugh that was half a sob, "and I'm afraid, afraid we've not much right to call ourselves Christians, for all our boasting. For we did judge Richard—and you, Sophia, were the worst of all of us."

Aunt Sophia made no sign. She stood with one hand steadyng herself on the table, watching her sister and waiting.

"You always said that the little girl was Richard's child, Sophia," continued Aunt Frances. "You and Benjamin would never have anything else, and you used to sneer at me when I ventured to doubt you. And you almost made me and Caroline believe you—you knew more of the world than we did. But you were wrong, Sophia, and you must know you were wrong before Richard dies. Or you'll never, Sophia, never be a happy woman again as long as you live!"

Still no one spoke. We were all watching, listening, Mr. Winterbee more closely than anyone.

"You and Benjamin, Sophia, used to sneer and say that if there was nothing to conceal, Richard ought to speak out," continued Aunt Frances. "Yet it wasn't any of your business to know who Sylvia really was, and in what relation she stood to Richard. But now you shall know, and then you'll see what a good man Richard has been, in spite of all we've thought and said. We've wondered why he did all he did for the child; it was by way of atonement. Atonement; do you understand, Sophia? And not for any sin of his own. No!"

Aunt Sophia leaned over the table—nearer, nearer to her sister. She was watching her eagerly, steadfastly.

"He was making atonement for a dreadful wrong," Aunt Frances went on. "He tried to make up to her for what she had lost—father and mother—through the sin, the crime—of his own brother."

I heard Mr. Winterbee draw in his breath sharply. Then I heard Aunt Sophia's voice—harsh, tremulous.

"Which brother?" she demanded.

"Our brother John."

Of what long-buried tragedy were we going to hear—what story was this which Aunt Frances—tearful, trembling—was telling us?

"John Harrington was a bad man!" she exclaimed, with more energy than I had ever supposed her capable of. "A bad, bad man—I, his sister, have to say it, though the grave's only just closed over him."

"What's that?"

Was that really Aunt Sophia's voice? I forced my gaze away from Aunt Frances's grey face, and looked at her elder sister. Aunt Sophia was bending

over the table—she seized her sister's arm and shook it.

"What's that?" she repeated. "John? Grave only just closed over him—speak, Fanny!"

Aunt Frances choked down a sob and shook her head as if to deprecate any attempt to make her tell her story in any other way than her own.

"While we have been together since my mother's death," she said, "Richard and I have become more of friends—we have understood each other better—no, to be just, I have understood him better. And we have talked at night, and because I pressed and begged him to do so, he told me the truth; and you know why I'm telling it to you now."

"Tell it all, Fanny, tell it all, my girl!" said Mr. Winterbee, kindly. "Out with it, Fanny—do you good. Probably say the same if he was here, would Dick—quite on the cards that he would, you know. Never can tell."

"You know what happened when John first went to London," continued Aunt Frances. "You know that he went to Canada, and that he was said to have died there, and that papers were sent home about his death. But he didn't die there—the papers were all forgeries—he forged them."

Mr. Winterbee said, "God bless my soul!" under his breath, and then repeated the word forgery three times, each in a low key.

"After that he came back to England under an assumed name," Aunt Frances went on. "He called himself James Hannaford. He set up in business in the City as James Hannaford. He called himself a financial agent. And it was under the name of James Hannaford that he was charged with forgery, and

tried, and found guilty, and sentenced to fifteen years' penal servitude."

Once more Mr. Winterbee said, "God bless my soul!" in a very low voice, but no one else said a word.

"Richard never knew anything of it," continued Aunt Frances, "until just before the trial took place. Then John sent for him and revealed everything, and said he knew there wasn't a chance for him, and what his punishment would be, and he begged Richard to keep the secret from all of us for our mother's sake. And then he told Richard that there was one thing troubled him greatly—he had betrayed a friend's confidence, and had ruined him, and the man had shot himself in sheer despair, and had left a wife and a child penniless. He begged Richard to do something for them. And that was how Sylvia and her mother came under Richard's protection. And the sad thing was that Sylvia's father was an old fellow-student of Richard's, whom he had lost sight of for years, and who had been ruined by Richard's own brother. Besides, it killed the mother, too. And now you know why Richard devoted himself so to Sylvia. He was trying to atone for his brother's sins."

How were things going on upstairs? Would he fight through it all, this winner of many fights, or were the grey wings enfolding him closer?

"He is better than any of us, with all our pretensions," said Aunt Frances, in the midst of the dead silence which had followed her last words. "He did things."

Aunt Sophia suddenly sat down in the chair from which she had risen at the beginning of this scene. She looked an old woman.

"Where's John Harrington, Frances?" she asked.
"Tell me where John Harrington is?"

"He's dead," answered Aunt Frances. "He died on the very day of our mother's death. Richard had the news last week. Do you remember that when Richard brought Sylvia here years ago he was suddenly called back to London? That was because of John. He had been released from prison some little time before the proper period was over because of rescuing an official from a convict who tried to murder him. Richard found him money for a new start—he went to Ceylon and found employmen there. And there he died. And now, you see, Sophia, how we've misjudged Richard."

"Frequent occurrence, Fanny," interjected Mr. Winterbee. "Frequent occurrence in life. Oh, yes! Often happens, I assure you. I've been misjudged myself, I have indeed. I expect to be misjudged. None of us perfect. No. Can't expect it, you know. Sad story, that of John; very sad story. However, take my advice; mum's the word, Fanny; mum is *the* word. Let sleeping dogs lie. My earnest and most de-lib-er-ate advice is, whether poor Dick succumbs or recovers—say no more about it. It's over. Dick's been a wise man to keep his own counsel. I admire Richard more than I can express. No use scratching up dead dogs, you know, any more than in disturbing sleeping ones. Sure to get bitten if you do."

"And Richard has borne more than that," said Aunt Frances, who had not heard a single word of what Mr. Winterbee had said, and was, I verily believe, half beside herself with grief, "for he told me, poor lad, that he loves Sylvia with all his heart and

soul, and yet could never let her see a sign of it because her father's and mother's death lay at his brother's door. And now he's dying—and there'll be an end of everything!"

Therewith Aunt Frances broke completely down and wept bitterly, being, as she was, greatly overwrought, and, as Mr. Winterbee whispered to me, of an uncommonly sentimental sort of nature.

But Uncle Richard lived through that night, and through the next day, and through the next night, and on the morning after that the doctors began to indulge in hints and veiled allusions as to the probabilities and possibilities, which were as maddening as they were encouraging. They would not say that he was going to recover, but they positively refused to say that he was going to die. And on the fifth day they allowed me to see him just for a moment, and to tell him that Sylvia was coming and would soon be at his side. She had done exactly what I knew she would do—caught the next boat and cabled to me as she went aboard that she would arrive on the eighth day from leaving New York—and I had an instinctive feeling that the tidings would help Uncle Richard in his fight. Joy never killed anybody—he, at any rate, began to show some very marked signs of improvement, and the doctors began to be a little less vague in their answers.

I travelled across country to Liverpool to meet Sylvia. It was late at night when the great liner got in, and as there were no trains to our part of Yorkshire until morning we had to remain at an hotel. That gave us an opportunity to talk, and while we talked I came to a decision. I was going to tell Sylvia of Aunt Frances's revelation to us on the night whereon Uncle

Richard lay at death's door. Right or wrong—advisable or inadvisable—I was going to tell her. It seemed foolish to let anything remain hidden between these two. And I believed that I knew Sylvia well enough to know that the misdeeds of half-a-dozen John Harringtons would have no weight with her against her affection for Uncle Richard.

She would hear nothing that I wanted to say until I had told her everything that I could remember about the circumstances of the shooting accident, the details of that long week during which we were all racked with fear and anxiety, the prospects of Uncle Richard's recovery, and his joy on hearing that she was on her way to him. And like most folk who have some very weighty and remarkable tale to tell, I encountered something very like indifference to the story of the hidden mystery of Uncle Richard, his brother, her parents, and herself. Sylvia was of the order which cares little for the dead past. Nevertheless, when it was told, she sat thinking, in silence, for a long time.

"Jerry," she said at last, "do you know what really made me go to America—it was a bit sudden, wasn't it?"

"Well?" I replied.

"That night, after the Benjamin Harringtons had been at Keppel Street," she said, "I found out that Dick and I were in love with each other. Not that he ever said a word to me—but I knew it as an absolute certainty; it was one of those inevitable things. And I thought, then, that I had better go away for a time, perhaps—you see, we had never been separated. One can think more clearly—in separation."

She paused and stared a long time at the fire.

"There never could be anything—anybody—like Dick, to me," she said in the end. "He's a queer person, Dick, full of nooks and corners, but he's a real man. And he's my man."

After that there was nothing to do but to escort Sylvia to Wintersleave and leave her to coax and rally her man back to life and health. With that curious spirit of contradiction and perversity which never ceased to characterise him, Uncle Richard suddenly set all the doctors' precepts at defiance; and having declared that a good deal more fuss had been made about him than was necessary, announced his intention of getting well at once. This he proceeded to accomplish in leaps and bounds, and just as the thrushes were beginning to sing in the holly-hedge, and the March mornings were bright with the spring sunlight, he was out and about again, watched anxiously by Aunt Frances, who was certain that he would overtax his strength, but with assurance by Sylvia, who knew him better than anybody and estimated the value of his increasing strength by the barometer of his temper and humour. When he began to find fault with the world in general, and the Government of the day in particular, when he began to get restless under enforced idleness, demanded his painting things and betrayed a desire for bitter beer, she decided that he was himself again, and that the usual course of life had better be resumed. Nobody was surprised when these two went away for some days, came back, and announced that they had been married; nor did it afford me any great reason for astonishment when Sylvia, some little time later, informed me, with quite a cheerful manner, that she

had given up the stage at the very threshold of a promising career (a fact which she was not behindhand in impressing upon me) for the simple reason that she had now got a husband to take care of and to cultivate, and that she meant to train him up in several ways wherein he had not yet walked.

It was in the spring of that year that the last stage of the relationship between the Harringtons and Highcroft Farm was reached. All had changed. Uncle Richard and Mrs. Richard were back in London; Aunt Caroline and her minister were in their sphere of work again, and Aunt Frances was with them; Aunt Sophia, after a final visit to the graves of her father and mother, had gone home to Kingsport with a tightly-closed mouth and tearless eyes that kept even Mr. Winterbee silent; the old house was closed—its ancient contents dispersed, save for certain heirlooms which had been shared amongst the brothers and sisters; the farmstead was cleared of its stock, live and dead. It fell to my lot to act for the rest in witnessing this breaking up, and to go at last round the empty rooms, ghostly with so many memories of the past; round the barns, granaries, and stables, all vacant, lifeless, silent. It fell to me, also, to visit Uncle Benjamin at this time, for the purpose of transacting some necessary business with him. That visit gave me still further insight into the remarkable characteristics of my kinsfolk on the maternal side.

Uncle Benjamin, in the language of those who speak of these things familiarly, had gone a complete smash. They had asked him many questions during his progress through the bankruptcy courts, but had failed to elicit very much information. Nothing had

daunted or awed him; his attitude all through was that of the man who had played a game and lost it. Now that it was lost there was nothing to do but sit down and watch somebody else play another game. As for himself, he had had his innings and was out—or, let us say, he had had a good run for his money, and, having been beaten on the post, was not inclined to tempt fortune again. In other words, this stage of his career having been reached, Uncle Benjamin calmly accepted the situation, and signified that his share in the making of history would henceforth be exceedingly passive.

But there was now Mrs. Benjamin to consider. She had what Mr. Winterbee called “a head on her shoulders,” and she was not inclined to sit still and do nothing. When she found out that Benjamin’s policy was to seat himself on the nearest stone by the side of life’s highway, there to watch the world go by, she immediately announced that she was going to do something for a living, and, having certain small means of her own, she purchased a model dairy business in a fashionable inland watering-place, and went thither with her daughter to manage it, Uncle Benjamin following, an unavoidable appanage, in their rear.

It was here that I found him one spring afternoon, a few days after the sale of the household goods and the farm stock. Mrs. Benjamin and her daughter were behind their counter—it was evident that they intended to devote themselves to business and to be businesslike, for everything about them and the place was spick and span, from their spotless gowns and aprons of white linen to the burnished marble and china of the fittings. And Mrs. Benjamin was as

much at home as she had been in her grand house at Sicaster—and, I think, quite as happy.

"Your Uncle Benjamin," said she, after I had greeted her and inquired after the general health of the family, "is at this moment either reading the newspaper at the free reading-room or talking politics with some other lazy people in the public gardens. He is now a Gentleman. He has his breakfast—then he goes out until dinner-time. He has his dinner—then he goes out until tea-time. He has his tea—then he goes out until supper-time. He has his supper—then he goes to bed. Your Uncle Benjamin never had such a grand life as he has now. He does nothing."

She smiled—not a pleasant smile—and waved her hand round the polished whiteness of the dairy.

"Everything that you see here, Gerard," she said, "is Mine. I bought it all with my own money. It is a good business; I took great care to go into every detail connected with it before I paid the purchase price. By strict attention to business on the part of Bertha and myself I calculate that within ten years from now I shall have saved enough money to retire on in reasonable comfort. If Bertha likes to marry during that time, she may—whether she does or not, I shall eventually share all that I have between her and Thomas, who is now a clerk in an auctioneer's office here and earning thirty shillings a week. So long as I live and as he lives your Uncle Benjamin will always have a roof over his head, a bed to sleep on, food to eat, and one new suit of clothes every two years—anything else that he wants he may find for himself. So far as I know, he has never had one penny to rub against another since we came here."

Your Uncle Benjamin is one of those people who are not to be trusted with money."

I began to wish for Mr. Winterbee's presence.

"Your Uncle Benjamin," continued the level, hard voice, "is a Fool. If he had taken my advice, and looked after himself, instead of looking after other people, mothers and sisters and folk that had no claim upon him" (that was intended for me), "he would now have been in a very different position. Take my advice, Master Gerard—you're a very clever young man, and a very conceited one, too, and you've had your head stuffed full of a lot of nonsense that's sure to be well knocked out of it—take my advice, I say, and look after Number One. Never you mind what anybody says—take care of yourself. If you don't, you'll die in the workhouse."

I thanked Mrs. Benjamin Harrington very heartily for her good counsel, and went away to find her husband. After prospecting round the free reading-room, the public gardens, and other places of popular resort, I ran him to earth outside the Pump Room, where, seated on a bench in the soft spring sunlight, he was settling the affairs of the nation with some other persons of leisure.

I was a little bit surprised at Uncle Benjamin's appearance. He had always worn good clothes and taken great care of them—he looked that afternoon like a quiet-mannered, well-behaved, oldish country gentleman taking the waters and his ease, with full profit to himself. But I was still more surprised by his air and manner; he looked as if he had not a care in the world, and he greeted me with a cordiality and effusiveness which I felt to be sincere and genuine.

The fact was, Uncle Benjamin was glad to see what we call "an old face." I suggested that we should dine together somewhere, and discuss the business which had brought me there over our dinner; he replied that nothing would give him greater pleasure. And over a nice little dinner in a quiet corner of a big dining-room in a big hotel he waxed confidential about himself.

"It's a queer game, life, my boy," said Uncle Benjamin; "the very queerest game there is. I played and lost. You're playing—you're at the wickets yet—you're getting into your stride—mind what you're about. Very often you're bowled just when you think you're well set—beaten by a head when you think you've just landed home. It's a good deal of a toss-up. And—if you come down, you'll find things very different to what they would have been if you'd gone up."

Over a cigar in the smoking-room he waxed still more confidential—and cynical.

"This is the first cigar I've smoked for a long time," he said. "My wife and children would think it a wicked waste of money if I bought even an ounce of fourpenny tobacco. After having given them everything that I could and indulged every taste they ever had when I had the means to do it, they consider that all I'm entitled to from them is just about as much as the law gives to a pauper. I'm making no complaint, and I don't say they're not right. But they'd have expected more from me. You see, there are some women who expect to have everything given, and who give nothing in return."

I offered no comment upon this. We transacted our business—he did not invite me to go back with

him to his wife's house, but walked with me to the station.

"If you've a bit of money about you that you don't want," he said, as we paced up the principal street and past the temptations of the shops, "you can treat me, if you like, to a bit of tobacco. There's a tobacconist here that knows me—if you were to deal with him and tell him that I'd call for a pipeful now and then—"

He waited outside the shop while I went in and effected an arrangement whereby Uncle Benjamin was to call in for a regular supply. And being by that time an ardent devotee myself, I bought him a pipe and a pouch and filled the latter with tobacco. He received these offerings with the unfeigned pleasure of a child, and laughed with real amusement at some thought which crossed his mind.

"My word!" he said. "Our folks would be mad if they knew I should be able to smoke a pipe every day. It affords them a deal of pleasure to know that I have to go without things."

We shook hands very cordially when I got into the train—it seemed to me that I was beginning to like Uncle Benjamin in a queer sort of way. He backed off from the train and stood staring about him, as lazy onlookers do. Suddenly he stepped up to the carriage window.

"You don't know what became of my old mare?" he asked in a low voice. "I expect she was sold."

"Yes," I answered. "But—I bought her in; Uncle Richard gave me the money."

"And where is she now?" he asked. "Not that she's any good—twenty, if she's a day, poor old lass!"

"Well," I answered, "I—you see, we didn't like to think that she should fall into anybody's hands—and so I had her shot, and she's buried in the paddock."

He nodded at that, and went away again, and again stood staring at the people about him. But just as the train was about to move off he came up to the carriage once more, and thrust his head through the window and put his lips to my ear:

"If your Uncle Richard, or you, or any of your aunts ever have a bit to spare," he said, "send a few shillings now and again to old Henny Thorpe—she's badly enough off, and her husband worked hard for our family. You see, I'm in that position that I can't send her anything myself, now."

Then we shook hands once more; on my side, at any rate, with a much better understanding. I looked out of the window when the train had moved off—Uncle Benjamin was admiring his new pipe.

I spent that night at the old inn at Wintersleave—the first time, I am sure, that any member of the Harrington family had ever slept in the village except under the roof of Highcroft Farm. Before going to bed I walked up the street and looked at the old place. Every window was dark—no spiral of smoke came from the chimneys—a heavy silence brooded over croft and garden, high gable and unstocked fold. The old days were dead. And yet—how they lived, must for ever live—within the living Me!

Next morning, after making my preparations for departure, I walked up to the Manor House. On the terrace, where the sunlight fell strongest, I saw Andalusia, her father, and the attendant, who was now

with him continually. The old Earl was at death's door—he scarcely knew anybody—yet he loved to be out of doors, and showed signs of impatience if they took him into the house. Sometimes he babbled of old sporting adventures—more often of stocks and shares—he was going swiftly towards the edge of the river wherefrom the mists never rise.

Andalusia came to meet me—together we turned towards the house. During the previous week we had seen each other every day—she had been my help and confidante.

"I am leaving in half an hour," I said. "I want to see the old library again."

We went through the old-fashioned, sweet-scented rooms into those of which I had so many memories. Everything was the same—yet not the same. There were the books—the pictures—the peeps of garden and greensward—there was the scent of fresh-cut flowers and dried rose and lavender. And yet . . .

"It is not a long time ago, and yet it seems a long time ago," I said, speaking to nothing.

"It is because we were children then, and are man and woman now," said Andalusia, speaking to me.

"When we were children," I said, speaking to Andalusia, "we used to—kiss each other."

Then Andalusia said nothing, but somehow her hands were within mine—and staying there.

"If we kiss each other now," I said, "it will be because we love each other—for always. And it won't be the end, but the very beginning."

Then we did kiss each other—very quietly. And for the life of me, I couldn't help saying to myself,

somewhere deep inside, with a big sigh of content,
“That’s all right—*all* right!”

There were Ghosts all around us—ghosts of the dead men and women—ghosts of the dead days; but in our hearts, stronger than these, pushing them aside, beckoning to us with encouraging hands, rose the smiling phantoms of the Future.

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